

TWO BEAUTIFUL SISTERS FIGHT FOR
THEIR LUSH PLANTATION HOME - AND THE
MAN NO ONE WOMAN COULD POSSESS

BELLE GLEN

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PART I

1833

Prologue

"You must be joking! Surely you're not seriously thinking about hiring a man like Dave Devan to act as our overseer at Belle Glen. Even you, Jake, are not that fool-hardy!"

Jake Alan reared back in his chair, lit his pipe, and calmly met his sister's frigid stare across the length of the long dining-room table. Amusement flickered in his faded-blue eyes. It suddenly occurred to him that Lettie, at sixty-five, was just as formidable and outspoken as she had been at twenty, a quality that, undoubtedly, had brought about her spinsterhood. But in spite of her sharp tongue, this small, seemingly frail woman held a very special place in Jake's heart, for he knew, as few others did, that beneath that rigid surface beat a heart of pure gold. And unlike most people, he was seldom intimidated by her straightlaced countenance. Certainly not now. Clearing his throat, he sought to find some way of appeasing her.

"Now, Lettie. I see no objection to hiring this young man."

"You wouldn't. You're a man!" she sniffed

"But what objections can you possibly have, especially since you haven't even met him?"

"You know very well what objections I have. The man

is a notorious gambler, a rake and a—a—" Lettie stopped short, flushing irritably.

"I believe bastard is the word you're seeking, but you can hardly blame him for that misfortune. It's true he's a gambler. But at least he's an honest one, and incidentally, he's one of the best. As for his reputation as a rake—well, that's strictly hearsay."

"You're determined to let a man with his shady background come here and manage this plantation? You are willing to let a man who is notorious for having mistresses and illicit love affairs in every town from St. Louis to New Orleans live under the same roof with your two young daughters?" Lettie sputtered incredulously.

"Dear Lettie, I can find no substantial fault with the man. Dave is the grandson of Linus Devan, who at one time was Natchez' largest landowner. The fact that Linus's daughter, an only child, got herself—er—in the family way, then refused to name the father, was unfortunate. It nearly broke the old man's heart, especially when she died right after Dave was born."

"I remember Linus Devan and his wife Mary quite well, and I am sure it was to their credit that they gave the boy a good home, but that hardly alters what he was or what he has become."

"I'll tell you what he was, Lettie. He was the best damn grandson a man could ever hope for. Why, Linus wrapped his whole life up in that boy. Taught him everything he knew. Taught him how to run a plantation, how to ride, shoot and hunt, how to gamble, and—yes, by heaven, how to get a wench when he needed one! In short, he taught him how to be his own man. Dave was never just a grandson to Linus, he was a companion and a friend. Lord, how I used to envy that old man!" Jake ended on a somewhat wistful note.

For a brief moment Lettie felt a stab of sympathy for her brother who had never had a son of his own. However, her sympathy quickly vanished.

"And what did Dave Devan do with his inheritance after Linus died? I'll tell you what he did—he lost it. He gambled away every bit of it!"

"You've got it all wrong, Lettie. After Linus lost his missis, he started drinking and gambling pretty heavily. Had a couple of bad crops and ended up losing everything and going in debt. Dave was at medical school at the time, studying to be a surgeon. By the time the old man died and Dave got home for the funeral, there wasn't anything left, not even enough to see the boy through his last year of school. I reckon that's when Dave took up gambling on riverboats."

"Very sad, I'm sure," Lettie retorted caustically. "And just when did you renew your friendship with this young man?"

"A couple of years ago. Steve Blake and I were on the *Delta Queen*, going up river to St. Louis to get buyers for our cotton. We sat down to a friendly game of poker. Of course, when I used to visit Linus on my way to New Orleans, Dave was just a youth, so I didn't recognize him at first, but he knew me right off."

"How very fortunate," Lettie sniffed, totally unimpressed.

"Anyway, we've struck up quite a friendship over the last couple of years."

"You mean over the poker table, don't you?" Lettie remarked sarcastically.

"You do have a way with words, Lettie," Jake chuckled. "But he's quite a man. I might add that Steve thinks a lot of him too."

"And that makes everything just fine, I suppose," Lettie snapped. "Where do you propose for Mr. Devan to stay, or have you thought that far ahead yet?"

"As a matter of fact, I have," Jake answered. "I would imagine that Dave will be wanting a certain amount of privacy, so I see no reason why we can't make the overseer's cottage more presentable for him. I believe he would prefer that to staying in the main house with us."

"Then it is all settled," Lettie stated bluntly.

"Not quite, I'm afraid. You see, the deal is this. For some time Dave has had a notion to buy some good river-bottom land and settle down. Oh, he knows he can't buy back what Linus lost, nor does he seem to want to

resettle in Natchez. But he's always had a hankering to own his own plantation."

"Not here, surely?" Lettie gasped.

"Maybe. As a matter of fact, Dave has been after me for some time to sell him a thousand acres down by the river. So when our overseer just up and left this winter, it struck me that I might be able to kill two birds with one stone."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that I've offered to let Dave buy that land at half its present value if he will, in return, agree to oversee and manage Belle Glen for a year. That will give me ample time to find a competent overseer and Dave enough time to decide if he really wants to settle down to running a plantation."

"And he accepted, I suppose," Lettie concluded.

"Not yet, but he's considering it, I believe," Jake replied. "We talked about it some while we were coming back from New Orleans, but when we docked yesterday, he still had not committed himself. Seemed pretty interested though."

"And just when will this Mr. Devan honor you with his decision?" Lettie asked.

"Tonight, I hope. Steve is bringing him here to Cheryl's shindig. I know you'll be delighted to meet him," Jake chuckled.

Lettie flushed angrily and rose from her chair. With an air of dignity, she walked over and opened the dining-room doors, but as usual she had to have the last word.

"I only hope that Mr. Devan will have the good sense to refuse your preposterous offer," she said stiffly. "I would not be happy to have him here as overseer, and most certainly not as a neighbor. Nevertheless, should he agree to this intolerable arrangement, I will of course abide by your decision."

"Thank you, Lettie. I was quite sure I could count on your generosity and above all, your *usual* sense of fair-mindedness," Jake quipped, chuckling as Lettie swished haughtily from the room.

It was always invigorating to spar with Lettie, Jake

thought, and this morning had proved to be exceptionally entertaining. It would be quite amusing to see Lettie's reaction to Dave at their first meeting.

Jake sighed and walked over to the double french doors that opened onto the veranda. Wistfully, he looked over the spacious front lawn. Yes, he would have liked to have had a son exactly like Dave Devan, but when his wife died giving birth to Jody, his dream of passing his small empire on to a son died with her. He had never desired to remarry, simply because no other woman could ever have replaced his beloved wife Maria.

Jake was not a devious man, but this morning his conscience bothered him. He had, of course, given Lettie only one of his reasons for hiring Dave. With two full-grown daughters on his hands, it was after all only a question of time before one, or both, would be ready to settle down and marry. If by chance one of them should actually marry Dave, so much the better. But which one? Cheryl was still nursing a childhood crush on Steve. Sheer puppy-love, Jake snorted to himself. Damn fool knows that Steve's family has arranged his marriage to his cousin Emily anyway. Cheryl probably just wants him because she can't have him. Just like a bitch in heat, the way she flaunts herself in front of him, Jake concluded, a worried expression on his face.

His thoughts turned to Jody, his younger daughter. Jody had not as yet shown any real interest in men. What was the matter with the girl, he wondered. Of course, she was two years younger than Cheryl, but still—a girl of sixteen should have begun by now to show a little interest in the opposite sex. Reluctantly Jake admitted that a match between Dave and Jody did not seem very likely at the present; still, a lot could happen in a year's time . . .

By God, he suddenly vowed, Dave Devan is going to accept my offer, even if I have to *give* him the land—and a daughter to boot!

Chapter I

A cool April breeze drifted through the open bedroom window and spilled over the naked couple lying on the nearby four-poster bed. The woman shivered and reached for a gauzy negligee which had been hastily thrown across the foot of the bed the night before. The man, his long, muscular body conspicuously exposed, slept undisturbed.

Lil Benton slipped into the thin wrapper and tied it loosely around her waist before lazily rolling over on her side. Propping her chin on one slender hand, she silently studied her companion. He was a tall, well-proportioned man, his broad shoulders and magnificent torso tapering down to narrow hips offset by a pair of strong, shapely legs. To Lil, he seemed like a young Greek god.

It was not only Dave Devan's body, however, that fascinated Lil, but also his arrogantly handsome face. Male bodies were hardly a novelty to a harlot like Lil, though few were as well built as this man. His darkly menacing, rugged face seemed that of Satan incarnate. And it was this that fascinated her most of all.

Without thinking, she leaned over and brushed a stray lock of dark hair back from his forehead. He groaned, stretched leisurely, then slowly opened his eyes. For an instant he didn't remember where he was, but as his

vision cleared and Lil's form took on a more distinct shape, his memory returned.

Arching one shaggy brow, Dave let his eyes rake boldly over Lil's inviting body, first with amusement, then appreciation. She shivered beneath his stare, those cold, piercing eyes reflecting so many facets of his unpredictable character—cynicism, ruthlessness, lust, and, on rare occasions, gentleness.

Dave chuckled softly and drew her to him, briefly wondering if there might be time to pick up where they had left off the night before. The clock on the dresser told him it was only noon, and since it was too early to get up a poker game and also too early to start for Belle Glen, he quickly decided that the afternoon could not possibly be put to better use. He had long ago discovered that Lil was most proficient at her trade; her inventiveness and diversity in lovemaking was the one factor that drew him back, time and again, to her establishment whenever he was in Vicksburg.

Though she was too hardened to be considered beautiful, Lil's seductive body made up for whatever her face lacked. Her large breasts and voluptuous figure would one day turn to fat, but for the present she was a damned provocative woman!

A satanic smile crossed his swarthy face as he deftly untied the narrow ribbon at her slender waist. The wrapper fell open and two firm, well-rounded breasts were exposed. Trailing a finger teasingly over each breast, Dave knew she was now eagerly anticipating his next move.

A lustful gleam appeared in his black eyes as his experienced hands moved over her smooth flesh, lightly caressing her flat belly, her curvaceous legs, then finally coming to rest on the softness between her thighs.

Lil trembled and snuggled closer. He excited her far more than any other man ever had, his experienced hands quickly arousing her to a feverish pitch of desire. Yet as her passion mounted, so did her frustration, for Dave always delayed the final act, deliberately teasing and provoking her with his kisses, his touch, the very hardness of his virile body until she became wild with wanting him.

She moaned with impatience as she wrapped her arms around his neck, flinging a shapely leg over his muscular thigh.

"Dave, don't go tonight. Stay here with me," she murmured.

Dave chuckled. "Don't you ever get enough?" he teased.

"Not of you. Never of you!" she whispered passionately, trailing her long fingernails over his broad chest.

"Or any other man, as far as that goes," he remarked cruelly.

Lil drew back and glared angrily at him. For a moment, she almost hated him.

"You bastard!" she spat angrily. "Why do you keep on coming here if you feel like that?"

A grin appeared on his handsome features as he coldly met her hostile stare.

"Why in the hell do you think? Now quit bitching and come on back over here," he commanded, jerking her to him.

"If you behave yourself, I might come back tomorrow night. We'll see," he murmured, kissing her bare shoulder.

Lil quivered as she clung to him. He was so strong, damn him! So much a man in every way. It was no wonder that everything about him excited her. All he had to do was touch her, look at her, and she felt herself powerless. She would do anything that he willed her to do. And now he was touching her. She moaned and pressed closer to him, her hands boldly moving over his chest, his slender waist, then lower.

Dave's lips hungrily covered hers, and as his breathing became more and more ragged, his lean body began to jerk spasmodically with its growing need. It was when her sensuous lips parted beneath his own that he suddenly ceased being a man, becoming a primitive animal with a consuming lust. Sensing Lil's own readiness, he mounted her. He made no attempt to be gentle and took her roughly, savagely pitting his strength against hers until, fi-

nally, his passion was spent and his lust was temporarily appeased.

Afterwards, with Lil sleeping next to him, Dave felt reluctant to leave such a warm, sensuous body just for an appointment with Jake Alan. Nevertheless, he had promised and he had to leave for Belle Glen right away. Dave was an opportunist and firmly believed that a good opportunity usually only knocked once, so he had no intention of letting this particular one slip through his fingers.

Jake had offered to sell him a thousand acres of prime land at half its actual value, provided that he, in turn, would agree to oversee Belle Glen for a minimum of one year. It was a ridiculous offer and Dave was convinced, or almost convinced, that it had been made in jest. Nevertheless, he was interested in buying the land and quite prepared to pay twice its actual value if necessary. His pockets were well lined from recent winnings at the poker tables, so he could afford to make a generous offer and a substantial down payment on the front end of the deal. It would be hard, if not impossible, for Jake to turn down such a tempting offer. Feeling totally confident that he would achieve his goal without much difficulty, Dave swung his long, muscular legs over the side of the bed and eagerly reached for his pants.

"For heaven's sake, Cheryl, you'd better hurry! You're not even ready, and your guests are arriving," Jody exclaimed as she bounded unceremoniously into her sister's room and rushed over to the window which overlooked the drive.

"My dear Jody, a lady *never* hurries. Besides, the later you are, the more you're noticed," Cheryl answered nonchalantly while continuing to preen in front of a long oval mirror.

Jody sighed impatiently and walked back to Cheryl.

"Here, let me fasten that last hook for you. Oh, and don't forget to wear the pearls Pa gave you," she added.

"They're on the dresser. Would you get them for me?" drawled Cheryl, still absorbed with her own reflection.

Jody picked up a single strand of perfectly matched pearls which had been carelessly thrown on the cluttered dresser, and without waiting to be asked, deftly clasped them around Cheryl's slender neck. She stood back to study the effect and decided that it was perfect.

Suddenly aware of her own reflection in the mirror, Jody experienced a familiar pang of envy as she critically compared her own image to that of her sister's. There was no comparison, only a striking difference; Cheryl's fair coloring contrasted sharply with Jody's dark coloring.

For perhaps the hundredth time Jody wished that she, instead of Cheryl, had been blessed with silvery-blond hair, violet eyes, and soft lily-white skin. Instead she had taken after her mother who had been of proud Castilian descent. Failing to realize her own unique beauty, Jody disliked her unruly black hair almost as much as she hated her olive complexion. There was, in fact, nothing which pleased her about any of her features. Her cheekbones were too high, her nose too straight, her lips too full and red, and her eyes too green—like a cat's, she often thought with disgust. The only part of her with which she couldn't find fault was her slender figure.

With a sigh of resignation Jody turned back to the window and noticed another carriage pulling up in the driveway. She watched with curiosity as Steve Blake alighted.

"Oh, there's Steve and there's a stranger with him. I wonder who he is," she mused.

Cheryl rushed to the window and stood beside her sister just as the two men disappeared beneath the veranda. Disappointed at having missed a view of Steve, she turned back to Jody.

"Don't tell me *you're* becoming interested in men, Jody!" she teased. "I must say, it's about time. Why, when I was sixteen, I had a dozen beaux. They're ever so much more fun than horses," she added cattily.

"Hmph! I'll take a horse over a man any day. At least *I* can control a horse, which is a lot more than you can do with Steve Blake!" came Jody's flippant reply.

"Well, I haven't seen anybody beating the door down

to get to you yet. The way you act and dress, no man in his right mind would have you," Cheryl snapped.

Jody turned on her heel to leave, but Cheryl caught her arm. For a moment the girls were silent; then, as their tensions eased, they both started to laugh at their childish outburst.

"Jody, do get dressed and come on down. You'll enjoy it. After all the money Papa spent on your dancing lessons, it looks like you'd at least make some use of them."

"Thanks, Cheryl, but I'm not interested in things like that. I'd be miserable just sitting there feeling awkward and out of place. Besides, I do have to be up at six in the morning; I promised Pa I'd break in that new mare."

Before Cheryl could reply, Jody had whisked out of the room. With a small sigh, Cheryl sank down on a nearby chair and thoughtfully examined her left hand. It was true that she had not managed Steve very well; still, had it not been for his mother's interference, she felt reasonably sure that Steve would have proposed to her long ago. But was this what she really wanted? She found him entertaining, charming and exceedingly handsome, but did she *really* love him? Since he had never even kissed her, how could she possibly tell? The thought that he might respect his mother's wishes so much and eventually marry his silly cousin was infuriating. On the spur of the moment, Cheryl decided that tonight would be as good a time as any to find out exactly what Steve's intentions were. Then she would settle the matter once and for all.

Hesitating briefly on the upper landing, Cheryl peered over the banister and quickly spotted Steve talking to Jake and another man who she assumed was the stranger Jody had mentioned earlier. The newcomer held her attention for only a brief moment, however, before her eyes quickly returned to Steve. Gathering her skirts in one hand, Cheryl gracefully floated down the curving staircase. Before her small foot had reached the bottom step, a score of young men had clustered around her in the spacious entrance hall, each extending a hopeful hand.

As Steve excused himself and made his way over to Cheryl, Dave slowly appraised the lovely girl from head

to foot. His bold eyes glittered with amusement as he watched her flirt pretentiously with one man and then another. So this was the beautiful belle of Warren County! Oh yes, he had heard all about her, though not from Jake or Steve. Respectable women were rarely ever a topic of conversation at a poker table. In fact, he knew almost nothing about Jake's family, nor had he ever been interested—until now.

Scowling, Jake watched Steve escort Cheryl onto the crowded ballroom floor. With an irritable sigh he forced his attention back to Dave.

"Dave, it's about time we had that little talk, so let's step out on the veranda where we can discuss business without being interrupted," he suggested, leading the younger man outside.

After offering Dave a cigar, then slowly lighting his own, Jake leaned heavily against the porch railing and listened to Dave's offer with amused interest.

"Ummm—a damned generous offer, but one I'm afraid I'll have to turn down," he stated flatly, smiling at Dave's sudden look of astonishment.

"May I ask why? Surely you're not opposed to making a good profit, Jake."

Amused by the younger man's determination, Jake took another deep puff on his cigar before answering.

"Nope, I don't think anyone could accuse me of that, but at the moment I need a good overseer a helluva lot more than I need money. I figure you'd make a damned good one. It would be for just a year, of course. By then I'll have had time to find a replacement."

Seeing Lettie motioning to him from the window, Jake flipped his cigar over the porch railing.

"Oh-oh—I've been found!" he laughed. "Reckon if I want to keep peace with Lettie I'd better get back to our guests. Look, Dave, give it a little more thought. In fact, why don't you ride out here tomorrow and let me show you around the place?"

Dave was about to refuse politely when he spotted Cheryl and Steve waltzing gracefully by the open french doors. The girl was beautiful, he thought with admiration

in his eyes, almost too beautiful. For a moment his mind wandered from Jake. He tried to imagine what it would be like to hold Cheryl in his arms, to teach her how to give and receive pleasure, how to use that lovely young body of hers.

"Well, how about it, son?" Jake asked with impatience.

Dave abruptly brought his thoughts back to the present.

"Yes, I'd like that very much. I'll ride out tomorrow morning," he answered, suddenly deciding that tomorrow might provide him with a better opportunity to get to know Cheryl.

"Good. Let you see what you'd be passing up and you just might change that stubborn mind of yours!" Jake chuckled.

"Maybe. Or you just might change yours," Dave retorted good-naturedly.

"You coming in?" Jake asked.

"I think I'll just stay out here a little while longer, if it's all right with you," Dave answered.

"Sure. Just make yourself at home, Dave. We'll talk some more tomorrow," the older man replied before reentering the ballroom.

Dave grinned at Jake's bullheadedness and wondered if his daughter took after him and would also have an obstinate streak. He quickly surmised, from the looks of her, that she did. Well, so much the better!

Still thinking about Cheryl, Dave sauntered about the deserted garden until he came upon a circular bench which surrounded the huge trunk of an old oak tree. Dusting off a place and sitting down, Dave leaned back and rested his head against the tree. The quiet was relaxing, its sense of peace disturbed only by the faint chirping of locusts in the distance. He had been seated only a few minutes when his solitude was disturbed by the sound of a man and woman's laughter. As the voices drew nearer, the rustling of silk suggested that the woman had seated herself on the other side of the large tree, which screened Dave from their view. The couple, unaware of his presence, continued their conversation in hushed but au-

dible whispers, low and suggestively intimate. Not wishing to embarrass them, Dave remained where he was and hoped that his presence would not be discovered.

"And now for your surprise, princess. I saw this in a little shop the other day. It sort of reminded me of you, and I couldn't resist buying it."

Dave recognized Steve's voice at once, and although he had never heard lovely Cheryl's voice he knew that it would be she who next spoke.

"Oh, Steve, how thoughtful! What on earth can it be?" she asked with excitement, as she tore off the wrapping.

Dave could sense that it was not what she had expected. Her next words betrayed her disappointment.

"Oh, a cameo. It's—it's very lovely," she murmured without enthusiasm.

"Don't you like it?" Steve asked. "Tarnation! I'll bet you've already got one."

"Oh no, it's not that. Only I thought it might be—I had hoped that perhaps it was something a little more personal. Oh Steve, I'm not a little girl any more. I'm eighteen and old enough to be proposed to—that is—if you *do* love me," Cheryl finished boldly.

"Love you! You know how I feel about you, Cheryl—how I've always felt about you, but you've surely realized by now that I'm not and never will be free to do anything about it. It was my father's last wish that I marry my cousin Emily as soon as she is of age. There's no way I can honorably get out of it."

Cheryl stamped her foot with impatience. "But you don't love her! You haven't even seen her in years and if you were half the man I believe you to be, you'd have broken the engagement long ago."

"I'm sorry if I've disappointed you, Cheryl, but what you want is quite impossible," Steve stiffly replied.

Much to Dave's amusement, Cheryl's voice, which had only a moment ago been quite venomous, now turned pathetically sweet. It was obvious that she was fighting for self-control.

"No, it is I who should apologize for mistaking friendship for something else. I always thought that you—that

you felt the same way I did. And now I'm quite ashamed that I've embarrassed you so," Cheryl lied, pretending to dab a tear from her eye.

Steve put his large hands on Cheryl's shoulders and suddenly realized as she looked up at him imploringly that he was lost. How could he possibly make this lovely girl realize that, regardless of how he felt towards her, it was quite hopeless.

"Don't apologize, Cheryl. Don't ever do that. I did share your feelings, you must know that. But what we felt was—well, it was childhood infatuation. Nothing more," Steve said sadly, yet with a certain finality.

Cheryl's voice changed again, but this time to a seductive whisper. "Are you quite sure, Steve? How can you be so sure when you've never even held me in your arms?" Winding her arms around his neck, she stood on tiptoe, bringing her lips within inches of his own.

"Kiss me, Steve—and then tell me you don't want me," she huskily murmured. Thrusting her sensuous body against his, she wrapped her arms around his neck, forcing his head down until their lips finally met.

Steve's resolve melted as he felt every curve of her body press demandingly against his own; her young, firm breasts touching his chest, her soft lips seeking and caressing his own.

"Oh God, Cheryl," Steve hoarsely moaned as, unwillingly, his passion matched hers and he began kissing her hair, her eyes, the hollow of her neck. He drew her closer to him, one hand pressing cruelly against the small of her back while the other fondled one of her breasts. For a brief moment he lost control, his lips coming to rest on the cleavage so provocatively exposed by her low bodice. As his lips moved lower, Cheryl jerked back with surprise.

Steve released her slowly and regained his senses, though he was still tempted by desire; a desire which had been held in check for so very long . . . He turned from her, determined not to give himself away again.

"Forgive me, Cheryl. I should not have let it go that far. Of course I want you. Any man would. But that isn't

necessarily love. We'd never be happy together—it just wouldn't work. You can't build happiness by causing others unhappiness. Can't you see that it would never work out for us? We'd only end up regretting our mistake."

Cheryl flinched as though she had been struck. Then her temper flared, causing all self-control to snap.

"All right! Go to your precious Emily and see if I care! She'll never be able to make you happy the way I could, and I believe that, whether you admit it or not, you know it. But go ahead and marry her. At least you'll still have your honor—and I hope you'll be miserable for the rest of your life!" Angrily, Cheryl turned and raced towards the house, her fading sobs echoing eerily in the dark.

Steve's shoulders dropped with weariness as he watched her disappear. With a disheartened sigh, he followed her back to the house.

Though amused by the whole episode, Dave nevertheless felt sorry for his friend. He suspected that, being honor-bound, Steve had hidden his true feelings from Cheryl; that he was, indeed, deeply in love with the girl. However, honor was not one of Dave's assets. Though he had the greatest admiration for Steve, he felt that for once his friend had acted like a fool. Well, if Steve doesn't see what he's throwing away, I sure as hell do, Dave thought. Had she offered herself to me . . .

A gentle breeze rushed through the mossy trees, causing him to shiver. Shaking his head, he abruptly brought his thoughts under control. The sweet smell of honeysuckle filled the air, while a mockingbird sang faintly in the distance.

Dave remained in the garden for a while longer, smoking a cheroot and enjoying the faint strains of a waltz that mingled with the soft sounds of the night. Fireflies seemed to dance to the tempo of the music, their flickering light somehow adding to the magic spell.

His thoughts kept returning to Cheryl. More than ever, he was determined to meet the girl. Suddenly, Jake's offer to become his overseer did not seem to be such a bad idea. After one year he would get the land he wanted, and during that time he would have ample opportunity to ac-

quaint himself with Cheryl. Who could tell what would happen in a year? The idea was certainly tempting.

For the first time since his grandfather's death, Dave felt almost at peace. It was as though he had finally found himself again, for he was now quite sure that this was the kind of life he wanted. A planter's life—and, of course, the right woman to share it with. A woman whose passion could match his own and satisfy his lusty needs. A woman who would give freely of herself and eventually bear him strong sons. A woman who could be soft or hard, fire or ice, but who could never be tiring. A woman such as Cheryl Alan!

Knowing now what he must do to fulfill that dream, Dave started back to the house to find Jake—and to accept his offer.

Chapter II

Dave reigned in his black stallion at the gate and glanced up at the sign which read Belle Glen—beautiful valley. Thoughtfully, he bit the end off a cheroot, lit it and after taking a few long puffs, went on.

Having been so engrossed in conversation with Steve, the previous night, when arriving at Belle Glen in an enclosed carriage; Dave had been oblivious to his surroundings. Now, he realized that Belle Glen was, indeed, appropriately named, for the lovely plantation was nestled in a valley between the bluffs of the mighty Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers.

Tall oaks, gnarled by time and dripping with silvery Spanish moss, formed a graceful arc over the winding road which led to the main house. Pink crabapple and white dogwood, blended delicately with gold and purple splotches of forsythia and lilacs, dotted the spacious front lawn, while jonquils, azaleas and thrift intermingled beneath the long veranda which stretched across the front and sides of the house.

The house itself was breathtakingly beautiful, expressive of the Roman architecture which was now so popular in the South. Eight large round columns were evenly spaced across the front of the house, with an additional four columns supporting each of the side verandas.

Green shutters offset the graceful long french windows, contrasting sharply with the white-brick exterior of the house.

As Dave drew up in front of the veranda, a small black boy appeared from nowhere and ran towards him. Dismounting, Dave handed the reins to him and walked up the wide steps. The sweet scent of wisteria permeated the fresh spring air, causing him to pause before knocking on the enormous front door.

The door was quickly opened by a young black girl who politely led him to the double parlor, then disappeared. Dave looked disinterestedly about the room, his eyes finally coming to rest on an exquisite portrait of Cheryl which hung above the elaborate Adam fireplace. Upon examining the painting at closer range, he found the likeness to be somewhat disappointing. Though the artist had captured Cheryl's loveliness to perfection, he had failed to give her a spark of vitality. The woman in the portrait was dispassionate, totally unlike the fiery young girl Dave had overheard in the garden the night before. Perhaps the artist hadn't known her.

He was still studying the portrait when the parlor door opened softly behind him. Dave turned, expecting to greet Jake. Instead, he found himself facing a slender youth whose sloppy appearance belied age as well as sex. A faded shirt dangled loosely over a pair of well-worn breeches, and a man's wide-brim straw hat all but hid face and hair. With a quick, jaunty step, the youngster crossed to where Dave stood and extended a small hand in greeting.

"Hello, you must be Mr. Devan. I'm Jody Alan."

Arching an eyebrow, Dave skeptically digested this information, his disdain becoming obvious as he boldly appraised Jody from head to foot. Then, without warning, an amused grin appeared suddenly on his handsome face.

"Why, of course—you must be Jake's *boy*!" he exclaimed, vigorously shaking her hand.

Astonished by his obvious mistake, Jody was momentarily rendered speechless by embarrassment. She suddenly realized she must look quite shabby to this man so

elegantly dressed in white, with his snug-fitting doeskin breeches tightly clinging to a pair of well-developed, muscular legs. Nevertheless, it irked her that he should mistake her for a boy. Dressed as she was though, she realized that she could easily pass for one.

An amused smile played on her lips as she was struck by the irony of the situation. Mischievous by nature, Jody quickly discarded her first impulse to enlighten him, and decided that it would be fun to teach this pompous stranger a lesson.

Dave took her silence for shyness, attempted to revive the conversation.

"I must confess I'm a little surprised. I knew Jake had a daughter, but I didn't know that he also had a *son*."

"No doubt he forgot to mention it." Jody replied. She deliberately disguised her voice by lowering its pitch. Her lips quivered with amusement, making it increasingly difficult to maintain a straight face.

"Umm—Anyway, I wonder why not, except that he was occupied with his guests last night," Dave conceded.

"Speaking of last night, Pa asked me to convey his apologies to you. He was called to Steve's place this morning on unexpected business. I doubt that he'll be back before late afternoon, but I'll be glad to show you around Belle Glen. That is, if you have no objections," she offered politely.

"None at all," Dave lied, inwardly cursing Jake for his absence.

Jody noticed Dave's white attire once again, but this time with dismay. He was hardly dressed for the occasion, she thought, but decided against letting him suffer the consequences.

"If I might make a suggestion, I believe you'd be more comfortable without your coat. We'll have to do some pretty hard riding to cover all you'll want to see, so it could get pretty hot out there this afternoon."

Seeing the sensibility of this suggestion, Dave silently shed his coat and handed it to Jody who hung it away by the front door. As an afterthought, he also relieved himself of the cravat, which had been choking him all morn-

ing; rolled up his sleeves and undid the first two buttons of his shirt, which partially revealed a deeply tanned chest covered by a mat of crisp black hair.

"Will this do?" he asked with a mocking grin.

Jody flushed confusedly. "I'm sorry if I was presumptuous, I always seem to say the wrong thing," she admitted apologetically, then added, "I guess that's why Pa says my mouth sometimes overloads my—"

Dave guessed that Jody had intended to finish with "backside" and laughed at the youth's apparent embarrassment and confusion.

"Not at all, Jody. You're quite right and, I must say, quite observant for a *boy* of—what? Thirteen or thereabouts?"

Embarrassment forgotten, Jody grinned, amused once more by still another one of Dave's blunders. Thirteen, indeed!

"Oh, thereabouts," she edged, mischievously adding, "and I must say that you're very well preserved for a man of—shall we say, *forty*!"

"Forty! Good God, boy, do I look like a man of forty?" he exploded, his ego dented just as Jody had intended.

"Well, if you're not forty, then how old are you?" she asked innocently, struggling to suppress the laughter that was almost choking her.

The break in Jody's voice, along with her downcast eyes, mollified Dave to some extent.

"Twenty-eight is more like it," he replied stiffly.

"You don't look like it, Mr. Devan," she lied. To further deflate his ego, she innocently added, "But I reckon some folks just naturally age faster than others!"

Before Dave could reply, Jody lightly mounted her mare, then turned to the yard boy who was leading Dave's stallion around to the front.

"Not over there, Joseph. Bring Mr. Devan's horse over to the mounting blocks," she commanded, feigning consideration.

"That won't be necessary, Joseph," Dave snapped. "I

believe I can still mount a horse by myself," he snarled as he snatched the reins from the bewildered boy's hand.

"Well, come along, Mr. Devan. We have a lot of riding ahead of us. When you get tired, just let me know, and we'll stop to rest," she offered, still pretending a concern for his welfare which she was far from feeling at the moment.

Jody's last impertinent remark infuriated Dave to the point that he would gladly have given her a good tongue-lashing, had she not already left him behind in a cloud of dust. As it was, he found himself straining to catch up with her. Since he had always prided himself on good horsemanship, his frustration increased tenfold when he realized that he was being outdistanced by a mere youth, a youth whom he was beginning to heartily dislike.

By the time he caught up with Jody, Dave's anger was so intense that he dared not trust himself to speak. The boy, after all, was Jake's son, he reminded himself, though he now readily understood why Jake had failed to mention it.

For a while they rode at such a hard gallop that conversation was impossible; but when they finally slowed down to a trot, Dave was too winded to speak at all. Gloomily, he rode beside Jody in silence. His anger faded, as she began pointing out various points of interest.

By late afternoon she had shown him the cotton and cane fields, slave quarters, sick bay, stables, warehouses and docks that overlooked the river, and last of all, the small gin that separated the cotton lint from the seed and baled it. The plantation was like a small city within itself. Though he still had not seen it all, Dave was impressed with this small kingdom, thirty-five hundred acres, and a little more favorably impressed with the youth who seemed to know its every nook and cranny.

On the way back to the house, Jody suddenly turned her mare from the main road and onto a narrow, winding path which led to a clump of woods. Wondering where they were now going, Dave followed along in silence. Soon they came to a clearing which enclosed a small picturesque pond.

"I think you've earned a rest, Mr. Devan," she chuckled.

Determined not to let the youngster get under his skin again, Dave forced himself to smile.

"Well, now, I might say that you've earned one, too," he replied.

They dismounted, and after tethering the horses, scrambled down a muddy, sloping bank which leveled off at the edge of the pond. Dave went first, and after reaching level ground, turned to help Jody. Suddenly she slipped and lunged towards him. The full impact of her body caught him by surprise and he was knocked to the ground. Jody landed unceremoniously on top of him and for a moment both were too breathless to speak or move.

Dave was not too stunned, however, to recognize the tip-tilted breasts now pressing hard against his chest! Nor did he believe that such tantalizing assets could possibly belong to any adolescent boy! As the truth quickly dawned on him, with it came a cold anger.

Jody quickly got to her feet and embarrassedly brushed the mud from her pants. Dave slowly appraised the girl from top to bottom, and a wicked grin suddenly appeared on his rugged features. So the little minx wanted to play games, it would be a cold day in hell before he'd allow any half-grown schoolgirl to get the best of him.

Amused, more than irritated, Dave got to his feet and calmly brushed himself off.

"I'm—I'm so very sorry," Jody stammered apologetically.

"No need to apologize, Jody. Anyone can slip," he said with double meaning. "Let's just sit down and cool off for awhile."

A peaceful solitude engulfed them as they rested lazily against the broad trunk of a live oak, each entertaining separate thoughts; Jody of Dave, and Dave of revenge!

A gentle breeze occasionally sifted through the mossy bough which shaded them from the hot, glaring sun. For the first time that day, Dave's taut muscles relaxed and, as he languidly closed his eyes, he leisurely plotted Jody's comeuppance.

Believing him to be asleep, Jody brazenly studied Dave with reluctant admiration. Regardless of his arrogance, he was, she decided, the most handsome man she had ever seen; though he appeared to be a gentleman in every respect, intuition told her that there was another, more dangerous, side to the man. His elegant appearance had seemed contradictory to the rugged nature of his physical being, making his true character a mystery to Jody. She wondered what he was really like, and if she would ever get to really know him. His face reflected so many different things—strength, determination, arrogance, cynicism—even, perhaps, brutality. Yet, when relaxed and off guard, he looked much younger and far less menacing.

Unexpectedly, Dave opened his eyes and looked at her, catching her by surprise. He knew that she had been looking at him by the way she was now blushing, and it gave him some small amount of satisfaction to know that she was momentarily discomfited. Exacting retribution from this young girl would not only be amusing, but extremely gratifying. He had, in fact, already chosen the means by which to do so.

Pulling two cigars from his pocket, Dave stuck one in his mouth, then tossed the other to Jody. His black eyes glittered sardonically as she looked confusedly at the cigar in her lap, then finally at him.

"Don't tell me that you don't smoke!" Dave exclaimed with feigned disbelief.

Completely taken by surprise, Jody frantically tried to think of a plausible excuse.

"Well, I—I—well, of course I do! It isn't that at all," she stammered. "But I really wouldn't think of taking your last cigar," she added quickly, handing the detestable object to him.

Dave, however, had no intention of allowing his scheme to be thwarted.

"Don't you worry about that. There's plenty more where these came from. Why, I remember when I was your age, I could blow a smoke ring as big as your fist! But I reckon all boys can do that sort of thing," he stated with the intent of baiting her.

"Oh, sure," Jody agreed lamely. Her dismay was obvious as she worriedly watched Dave hold a lucifer to his cigar, then take several quick puffs to get the end of it ignited.

"There, now. There's nothing like a cigar to make a man of you," Dave stated enthusiastically as he took another deep draw off his cigar, then looked at her expectantly.

"Well, how's about it?" he asked, striking another lucifer on the seat of his breeches and extending it to her.

With a resigned sigh, Jody reluctantly picked up the cigar and, following Dave's example, bit the end off and spat it out. Determined not to be squeamish, she then forced the vile object into her mouth and clamped down on it with her teeth. So far, so good, she thought with smug satisfaction.

Dave reluctantly admired her spunk, but wondered just how far she was willing to go in order to keep up this ridiculous masquerade. He hoped she would not end the pretense soon, just as he was beginning to enjoy himself. A wicked gleam appeared in his eyes as he watched Jody awkwardly attempt to ignite the cigar.

"That's right, Jody, take a good, deep puff and see what a *real* cigar tastes like. Beats the hell out of corn shucks, eh boy!" he exclaimed, slapping her so heartily on the back that cigar popped out of her mouth.

It was with great reluctance that Jody retrieved it and, with an unconscious grimace, stuffed it back into her mouth.

"Hell, boy! That's not the way you do it. Don't hold it with your lips like a sissy. Clamp down on it with your teeth, then take a really good, *deep* puff," he insisted, stressing the word "deep."

Jody innocently followed Dave's directions and, as he had expected, was quickly overpowered by the smoke. She was immediately seized by a fit of coughing which left her breathless and weak. A wave of nausea swept over her as she staggered to her feet and leaned feebly against the tree under which they had been sitting.

"My, my, you're looking a little pale, Jody!" Dave remarked gleefully. "Feeling a bit queasy?"

With her eyes still closed, Jody nodded affirmatively, too sick to notice the laughter in Dave's deep voice. She was, therefore, completely startled by the unexpectedness of his next suggestion.

"Well, now, I know just the thing to perk you up. A good refreshing swim!"

Jody's eyes flew open with alarm.

"Swim! But I can't—I—I—" she stammered.

"You can't swim!" Dave exclaimed mockingly. "Well, I guess we'll just have to remedy that. Every boy should know how to swim."

"But I really don't feel like learning right now, I feel sick." Jody argued.

"Nonsense! It's just what you need. A short swim would do us both good right now."

Dave's even white teeth flashed in a sardonic grin as he nonchalantly began unbuttoning his shirt. As it parted down the front, exposing crisp black hair which partially covered his broad chest, Jody's eyes widened with fright and she quickly covered her face with shaking hands.

"Oh, don't do that! You can't do that here!" she cried pleadingly.

"And may I ask why not? There's no one here except us!"

"You just can't!" Jody all but screamed as, peeking through her slender fingers, she saw him slip out of his damp shirt and casually toss it aside.

"You've seen a naked man before, Jody, what's the problem?" he sarcastically asked.

"But I haven't!" she exclaimed.

Irritated at being caught in an impossible situation of her own making, Jody dropped her hands from her face and glared angrily at him.

"I'm not feeling very well," she replied shakily, "and I would like to go home—*now*."

The hot sun glistened on his broad shoulders and muscular torso as he moved towards her with panther-like grace. An amused smile twisted his cynical lips as she

tried to back away, her retreat cut short by the very tree under which they had rested only minutes before.

"Oh, you would," he retorted coldly.

"Yes—yes, I would. I—I feel sick," Jody replied in a small voice.

"Sick—or afraid, Jody?" he asked, placing his strong arms on either side of her so that she was pinned to the tree.

Jody trembled as he towered above her, his very nearness disturbing her in a way that she did not understand. She sensed, rather than saw, the menace behind those mocking eyes which held her spellbound, and she could not tear her eyes away from his. He was so large, so overpowering, that she suddenly felt very small in comparison and totally defenseless. She resented the feeling and refused to give in to it.

"I'm not afraid of you, Dave Devan. Not you or any other man," she said defiantly.

"I somehow didn't think you would be, my dear Miss Alan," Dave chuckled.

"Miss! Why, you knew all along that I wasn't a boy!" Jody declared hotly.

Dave stepped back and brazenly surveyed her from head to foot.

"Let's just say that, in spite of your somewhat unusual behavior and sloppy appearance, you do possess certain—ah—delightful assets which would be quite unseemly on a boy!"

"Oh!" Jody gasped, his meaning quite clear to her. "You, sir, are not a gentleman."

"And you, my dear, are not a lady," Dave retorted mockingly.

"Why, you—" Jody sputtered as she drew back her hand to slap him.

Dave anticipated her move and caught her wrist, jerking her roughly to him. For a moment, their eyes clashed defiantly. Then, without warning, he scooped her light body into his powerful arms and started toward the pond.

"What—what are you doing?" Jody squealed, strug-

gling to free herself and beating on his broad chest with both tiny clenched fists.

Dave tightened his hold on her and continued towards his destination, finally coming to a halt at the pond's edge. Glancing down at her, he grinned as he saw the anger sparkling in her large emerald-green eyes.

"How dare you! How *dare* you treat me like this!" she screamed at him. "Put me down this instant!"

"You're quite sure that is what you want?" Dave asked mockingly.

"Of course, it's what I want," she sputtered.

"Very well, young lady. Your wish is my command!"

Too late Jody realized her mistake, and in the next few seconds, she found herself sailing through the air, then landing with a loud splash in the middle of the pond. She surfaced, coughing and gasping for breath.

Dave was not surprised to find Jody could tread water, nor had he doubted that she could swim. He was quite unconcerned for her safety and amused by her anger as she swam towards the shore.

"My, my, you do learn fast for someone who doesn't know how to swim! You might try closing your mouth the next time though," he chuckled.

"Why you—you lowdown, cowardly, sneaky son-of-a—" Jody sputtered, trying to remember some of Jake's more colorful descriptions.

"Why, Miss Alan, what shocking language for a young lady to use!" Dave mockingly admonished.

"I don't want to be a lady, and I'm certainly not young! I'm sixteen," she retorted angrily as she struggled out of the water and onto the bank.

The laughter died in Dave's throat as he watched Jody stagger to her feet, her thin cotton shirt clinging provocatively to her lithe body, its transparency so revealing that nothing was left to his imagination.

Had Jody not been so angry, she would have seen the surprised admiration in Dave's eyes as, with legs planted wide apart and arms crossed, he slowly surveyed her from head to foot. Frustrated to the point of tears, Jody could only think of one thing—revenge!

"Oh, my hat!" she exclaimed helplessly, pointing to where it floated just at the water's edge.

Dave bent over to retrieve it for her, realizing belatedly that he had unwisely put himself in a very precarious position.

Without hesitating, Jody took quick aim at Dave's backside, drew back her small pointed boot and, with a swift kick, sent him sprawling headfirst into the water.

Balancing first on one foot and then the other, she then pulled off her wet boots and carelessly dropped them on the ground. A smug little smile played across her tanned face as she waited for Dave's astonished face to pop out of the water.

A worried frown slowly replaced her smirk when, after several moments, he failed to reappear. It suddenly occurred to her that he might have struck his head on some submerged sharp object, thus knocking him unconscious.

"Mr. Devan—Mr. Devan," Jody called, quickly stepping to the edge of the water.

Receiving no answer, she cupped both hands and anxiously called to him again. Still there was no reply.

Had Jody been looking down, rather than across the pond, she undoubtedly would have noticed two large hands cautiously emerge from the water; hands which unexpectedly grabbed her slender ankles, roughly pulling her forward.

It took only a second for Jody's head to pop back out of the water, her expression changing from one of sheer surprise and bewilderment to one of outrage as she heard Dave's roaring laughter behind her. She jerked around to face him, anger blazing in her cat-like eyes.

"Oh, you—you—" she sputtered, clenching her small fists into tiny balls. "Don't you dare laugh at me!"

But Dave was laughing so hard that, for the life of him, he could not have answered her with a straight face.

"I—I can't help it! You—you look like a drowned cat!" he finally managed to get out with a certain amount of breathlessness.

Jody looked down at her drenched clothing and then at him.

"Well, what do you think you're laughing at? You don't exactly look like Beau Brummell!" she retorted ungraciously.

Looking at him, it suddenly struck her how ludicrous they both were. His boisterous laughter seemingly infected her and, minutes later, both were still laughing so hard that they could hardly hoist themselves up on the bank. After several attempts, Dave finally made it, then extended a hand to Jody. She hesitated, glancing doubtfully at him.

"Come on—I won't throw you in again," he promised.

"Truce?" Jody asked, still withholding her hand.

"Truce!" Dave laughed as he grabbed her tiny hand and pulled her up on the bank.

Too winded for conversation, they plopped unceremoniously on the grassy bank and, reclining lazily, allowed the hot sun to dry their damply clinging garments. After several minutes of silence, Dave rolled over on his side and faced Jody who was stretched out on her back, one slender arm flung carelessly across her face while her other one rested behind her small head.

He eyed her curiously, studying every feature in her young face, every curve of her well-proportioned body. It puzzled him that Jody still seemed like a little girl to him, when so obviously she was not. Her wet, clinging shirt certainly proved that point, provocatively revealing two firm, well-rounded breasts which rose and fell rhythmically with her jagged breathing.

He suddenly realized that, under similar circumstances, he would have taken any other female then and there, age be damned! It would hardly have been the first time he had taken a girl as young as Jody. Hell, he thought, I've bedded whores no older than this girl, and they were pretty damned experienced in knowing how to satisfy a man's needs. But that was just the point. Jody was not a whore, nor was she even experienced. It was obvious, that she was totally unconscious of how much her damp clothes revealed of her young, supple body. She was, he decided gloomily, a complete innocent; otherwise, she would not be lying beside him at this very moment.

To conceal his mounting lust from her eyes, Dave turned over on his stomach with a low groan.

"Did you say something?" Jody asked innocently. With a lazy yawn, she turned over to face him.

Dave turned his head to look at her, a tiny smile playing at the corners of his wide mouth. It was ironic that Jody, rather than her sister, should be lying beside him just now. Had it been Cheryl, he knew that no power on earth would have kept him from taking her—by force, if necessary.

Jody, however, wasn't anything like Cheryl. Her youthful innocence acted as a shield, protecting her from his lust as nothing else would have.

"Well, *did* you say something, Mr. Devan?" Jody repeated, rather puzzled by his curious expression.

"Oh, just that I think we should be heading back to the house. Don't you?" he answered, lithely getting to his feet.

"Yes, I guess we should," Jody agreed reluctantly as she also stood up. Then she added, "Our clothes should be dry by the time we reach the house anyway."

"Let us hope so. I'd hate for Jake to think that I hadn't been looking after his daughter properly. He might change his mind about hiring me," Dave joked.

"I seriously doubt that, Mr. Devan. If Aunt Lettie could not talk him out of hiring you, then nothing you do is going to change his mind."

"Oh? And did your Aunt Lettie try?"

"Most assuredly," Jody laughed.

"But what objections could she possibly have? I don't believe we've even met."

"Oh, you haven't. Aunt Lettie made quite sure of that last night by refusing to receive the guests with Pa and then spending half of the night in the kitchen looking after the refreshments," the girl laughed.

"Why in heaven's name?"

Jody looked at him curiously, debating if she should change the subject or be honest with him. She decided upon the latter course, believing that, if he were forewarned, he would probably be able to change her aunt's

unfavorable opinion of him at the first given opportunity.

"Because she says that you're a scoundrel, a gambler, a—a rake and a bas—" Jody stopped, suddenly flushing with embarrassment.

"Never mind. I can well imagine the rest," Dave chuckled.

"Well, is she right?" Jody asked innocently.

"Most assuredly—in *every* respect, I'm afraid."

"Even the part about your being a bas—well, you know what I mean," she asked incredulously.

"That most of all," Dave shortly replied.

"Oh! Well, after all, you can hardly be blamed for that. Anyway, I'm glad Pa likes you," she stated emphatically, then added shyly, "So do I."

"You do, do you?" Dave chuckled, amused by the girls forthrightness.

"Yes. In fact, I think you're quite nice—that is, when you're not being so mean and arrogant. But you're not really like that deep down, are you," she mused.

"I'm not? Then just what am I like?" he asked with a bemused grin.

"I don't really know, yet," she answered thoughtfully, "but I don't think you're nearly as hardened and arrogant as you first appear. That's just a—a sort of pretense, isn't it?"

"A pretense! Why would I need to pretend anything to anyone?"

"I don't know. But I can't help feeling that you do. As a matter of fact, I don't think you are half as bad as folks say you are, even if you *are* a gambler and—and all those other things," Jody declared staunchly.

"Well, it's always nice to know I have one friend," Dave laughed.

"Two. Don't forget Pa," she reminded him seriously. "Oh, I'm so glad that you're coming to work for us! You are, aren't you?" she asked quickly.

"Yes, I think I might just give it a try. Now, up you go, young lady," he said as he lifted her effortlessly into her saddle.

Jody took the reins from him, then waited for him to

mount. As she watched him swing gracefully into his saddle, she marveled that such a big man could move so lithely.

"Ready?" Dave asked, gathering the reins in one of his large hands.

"Ready. Tell you what—why don't we race back?" she suggested. "I bet I can beat you!"

Before Dave could reply, Jody was off in a cloud of dust, her long black hair flying wildly behind her. It was a race which Dave was to long remember. Although he had won many races, competing with the stiffest competition, he now realized that he had seen few who could ride nearly as well as this young girl.

Rider and horse seemed one as they jumped over the low-cut hedges which spasmodically appeared as they neared the main house. All of a sudden, the tall fence which bordered the front lawn came into view. Seeing that Jody was not slowing down for the fence, nor swerving away from it, Dave's heart began beating wildly as he suddenly realized that she intended to jump it. Not believing that many accomplished riders, much less a young girl, could possibly master such a high jump, terror shot through him as he raced after her.

Then, to his amazement, Jody took the fence as easily as if it had been only a foot high! With a sigh of relief, Dave spurred his horse, took the fence and came to a halt beside Jody.

"You little fool!" he shouted. "You could have broken your neck jumping that damned fence!"

"But I didn't," Jody retorted flippantly.

"You were lucky. The next time, you may not be," Dave snapped. "Just don't let me catch you doing a damn-fool thing like that again."

"And if I do?" she challenged, although she was feeling strangely pleased by his obvious concern.

"If you do, I'm going to give you a spanking which has obviously been long overdue," he stated flatly.

"Now you sound just like old Henry," Jody pouted.

"And just who is old Henry?" Dave asked grumpily.

"Well, he *was* our overseer—until I ran him off. He

didn't like interference and apparently didn't appreciate some of the suggestions I made. Of course, I didn't really mean to interfere, but I do love Belle Glen. I just couldn't keep silent when I disagreed with the methods he used."

"Like what, for instance?" Dave asked, wondering if he, too, would get interference from the headstrong girl.

"Well, for one thing beating the slaves, which he did every time he lost his temper. Of course, I don't believe in pampering them, because it makes them shiftless. Still, they are human, too, you know. Besides, there is an old saying, 'Sugar will catch more flies than vinegar.' If you can get the slaves here to like and trust you, your battle is half won. The cooperation you get from them can either make or break a plantation."

"I couldn't agree with you more. Only a fool would use the whip, unless it was absolutely necessary."

"Oh, I'm so glad that you feel that way. I somehow felt that you would," Jody sighed with relief, then added, "And if I can help you in any way, I'll be glad to do so."

"I may just have to take you up on that offer sometime," Dave remarked cheerfully. "In fact, I might need all the help I can get, at first."

Jody flashed him an impish grin. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised!" she chuckled.

Chapter III

Dave stood in the center of the small one-room log cabin and disdainfully surveyed his new living quarters. True to his word, Jake had seen to the cabin's renovation so that it was ready when Dave arrived.

Though not large, the cabin looked almost spacious, probably due to the sparse furniture. A bed and combination wardrobe-chifferobe occupied one end of the room and a dry-sink and small round oak table with two straight-back chairs occupied the other. A cane-back rocking chair faced the large stone fireplace which centered the back wall. The rough-hewn floor, which glistened from repeated applications of beeswax, was partially covered by a tattered oval braided rug.

Jake had obviously made every effort to make the cabin adequately comfortable. Still, it was scarcely the luxury Dave was accustomed to.

Pitching his coat over the rocker and rolling up his shirtsleeves, Dave sighed disgustedly and stalked outside to retrieve his valises.

It did not take long to unpack and arrange his personal belongings. By then, however, Dave was disenchanted with his prospects for the forthcoming year and sincerely regretting his hasty decision in accepting Jake's offer. It suddenly struck him that no land, and certainly no

woman, was worth sacrificing a year of one's life. Still chiding himself for being so foolhardy, he flopped down on the bed and, uncorking a bottle of whisky, poured himself a stiff drink.

Two hours and a bottle of bourbon later, he was just about to doze off when something, perhaps instinct, aroused him. Immediately sensing he was no longer alone, he rolled over to his side and glanced towards the front door.

Remnants of sunlight filtered through the open doorway faintly outlined the figure of a woman, a very alluring woman, elegantly dressed in a well-fitted blue velvet riding habit.

The girl stiffened, but did not speak, as Dave's dark gaze boldly raked over her appearance. Resentful of his insolent appraisal, her blue eyes flashed angrily while he regarded her with a sardonic grin. So this was to be the new overseer, the man whom Jody had frequently mentioned for the past few days, thus arousing Cheryl's curiosity. Brazenly she returned his stare before finally speaking.

"Mr. Devan, I presume?"

Dave lithely got to his feet and sauntered over to where she stood.

"At your service, Miss Alan," he replied with a mocking bow. "And to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

Cheryl sensed his amusement at her unseemly visit and her anger mounted. She managed, however, to keep her cool composure.

"I happened to be riding by and noticed that your door was open. I thought that perhaps one of the servants had forgotten to close it. I—I had no idea, of course, that you had already moved in," she coolly said.

"Of course," Dave grinned, seeing through her lie, knowing that she had come out of idle curiosity. "Well, since you are here, may I offer you the hospitality of my—er—humble abode, such as it is."

Cheryl hesitated a moment; then, throwing caution to the wind, haughtily swept by him. Coming to the fire-

place, she turned and arrogantly surveyed the room with a rudeness intended to put Dave in his place.

"I trust you have everything you need, Mr. Devan?"

"That, Miss Alan, depends on what you mean by everything," he answered suggestively, raising one dark brow.

Recognizing his obvious insinuation, Cheryl was momentarily disconcerted.

"I—I was referring to your lodgings," she snapped.

"Well, in that case, I believe everything is in order, at least for the present. I might add that your concern for my comfort is, indeed, most gratifying," he stated with mock humility, adding, "I'm sure it isn't every day that an overseer receives such thoughtfulness from his boss's daughter."

Cheryl bristled and, thrusting her determined chin upwards, said the first thing which came to mind.

"Nor is it every day that one hires an overseer with *your* background. Or perhaps I should say—your *lack* of background!"

Black eyes glittered dangerously for a brief, tense moment, and Cheryl, realizing that she had gone too far, unconsciously took a step backwards. Dave saw the look of uneasiness which passed over her lovely face and was amused to find that he actually had the power to frighten this high-spirited girl. The realization was pleasing and his anger quickly faded.

"Oh, I do have a background, Miss Alan. A little unusual, perhaps. But I'm sure you've already been informed of my past, so I won't bore you with the details."

"I daresay everyone else is acquainted with your past history, too, so please *do* spare me the details," she retorted irritably.

Dave threw back his head and laughed, his white even teeth contrasting vividly with the dark handsomeness of his rugged face.

"I daresay they have, my dear Miss Alan!"

"I can see that my coming here today was a mistake, so I'll bid you good day."

Cheryl attempted to walk past him, but Dave unexpect-

edly caught her arm. Cupping her small chin in his other hand, he forced her face upwards until their eyes met and held in silence.

"Tell me, dear lady, just why *did* you come today?"

"I told you why," Cheryl gritted. "I just happened to be passing this way and—and—"

"And I suggest that you tell me the truth. You're really not very good at lying, you know," he softly accused.

"*How dare you!* You're—you're insufferable!" she gasped.

"And you, young lady, are a little hypocrite!"

Cheryl raised the riding crop she held in her free hand and wildly lashed out at him. Instinctively averting his head, the blow fell soundly on his neck, causing blood to gush forth and trickle down the front of his shirt.

For a moment, she could only stare in horrified silence at the wound she had inflicted upon him. Then, visibly pale and shaken, with a sob she jerked free of his grasp and fled from the cabin.

Dave walked out to the front porch and, leaning against the porch railing, thoughtfully watched her until she had ridden from view in a cloud of dust. A smile of amusement passed over his face as he silently concluded that the belle of Warren County was definitely a woman worth having. Undoubtedly the most provocative woman he had come across, and he had encountered quite a few. She was also the most arrogant and spoiled. As her father's hired hand, he was at a distinct disadvantage in bringing her to heel; at least, for the present.

In short, the girl was a beautiful, high-spirited little snob, a combination which enticed rather than repelled him. Never having been one to resist a challenge, Cheryl's superior attitude, her very contempt and obvious aversion to him was most definitely a challenge. One he would be most eager to accept once he was the master of his own plantation, if not before!

A devilish smile touched his firm mouth, stamping his face with a look of diabolical determination as he turned and walked back into the cabin.

That same afternoon, Jake sent word by one of the house servants that Dave was to take his meals with the family whenever it was convenient for him to do so. An unusual privilege to be extended to a mere overseer, it was nevertheless a sensible arrangement for an unmarried man, extricating Dave from the burden of having to prepare his own meals. Another added advantage was that it would enable him to get better acquainted with Jake's older daughter!

In spite of Cheryl's snobbishness, she would be forced to endure his presence at mealtimes, but he had no doubts as to the extent she would be put out, particularly in light of their first meeting.

The anticipation of seeing her again exhilarated him. Being a professional gambler had taught him the art of masking his true feelings, a mask which he habitually wore and which prevented all but a chosen few from ever really getting to know him. To most people he was completely unfathomable.

As he followed a house servant towards the parlor, a sardonic grin briefly passed over his handsome features, but quickly faded when Jake greeted him with a welcoming handshake. He responded affably as Jake introduced him to the Marshes, who owned the adjoining plantation. They were an elderly couple and Dave took an instant liking to them.

The feeling was obviously mutual, which helped to ease the tension when Lettie Alan made her stately entrance.

If Lettie was recognized as one of Vickburg's most gracious hostesses, she was also equally known for her sharp tongue and blunt manner. Despite her small stature, there was an unspoken dignity about her which automatically commanded respect. Opinionated, she was quick to judge one's character and she was usually quite accurate. In spite of these attributes, she was oddly enough a very loveable person who was admired and respected by all who knew her. One could hardly accuse her of being unfair or intentionally rude. She simply liked you or she did not. One was seldom in doubt as to which category he or she had fallen.

She had been prepared to dislike the new overseer on sight, but her prejudices visibly wavered and her attitude softened as Dave gallantly bowed and gracefully lifted her wrinkled hand to his smiling lips. He was, after all, the grandson of a very old and dear friend, she reasoned, regardless of his questionable background and reputation.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Lettie," he murmured charmingly, adding, "and an honor to be offered such warm hospitality, for which, of course, you are so well known.

"Hmph! I wouldn't be too sure of that, young man," Lettie crisply replied, though somewhat taken aback. "There are some, no doubt, who think I'm a bit obstinate; however, I usually manage to get along with anyone who has a reasonable amount of common sense," she added with a wry smile.

"Don't let Aunt Lettie scare you, Mr. Devan," Jody laughed as she entered from the hall. "She's really a dear, and her bark is much worse than her bite!"

"Jody!" Jake snapped reprovingly. "Please excuse my daughter's bad manners, Dave."

"You should be excusing yourself instead, Jake Alan," Lettie interrupted. "After all, you've all but turned the child into a boy, so it's hardly surprising if her manners leave much to be desired."

Throughout this short exchange, Dave had been too stunned to speak. He had turned, expecting to find the boisterous young girl who had shown him around the plantation only days before. Instead, he found a young woman, young but undeniably lovely all the same. The change was unbelievable!

Sensing Dave's amazement over her improved appearance delighted Jody no end. Lightly laying her small hand on his sleeve, she flashed him an impish smile.

"I hope you're not too surprised by my appearance, Mr. Devan," she chuckled, "and I do hope you'll forgive my—er—deception the other day! I simply couldn't resist the temptation," she added mischievously.

Quickly seeing the humorous side of it all, Dave threw back his head and laughed.

"My dear *Miss Alan*—you, it seems are just full of surprises!"

"I'm afraid I fail to see the humor," Jake asserted in a puzzled manner.

Dave sobered immediately, but gave Jody a meaningful glance.

"Forgive my rudeness, Jake. I'm afraid I mistook your daughter for being—well, shall we say—much younger than she apparently is."

For a moment Jake looked puzzled, then a smile broke over his face.

"Oh, you mean the other day when Jody showed you around the place. Well, don't let that frazzle you, boy! It's even hard for me to realize she's almost grown. It is for a fact," he said with a shake of his head.

"It's no wonder, the way she gallivants all over the place dressed up like a young boy. You've encouraged her unseemly, and unladylike interest in your activities since the child was old enough to sit a horse. You have only yourself to blame for the results," Lettie declared hotly.

"Now, Lettie. Don't get all upset. What's the harm in teaching her how to run a plantation if she wants to learn? Why, right now, she knows more about growing cotton and managing slaves than most of our neighbors. Jody's my right-hand—" Jake had almost said right-hand man, but fortunately caught himself in time. "Anyway, she is a big help to me, so I fail to see the harm."

"Obviously," Lettie remarked, now wishing to change the subject. "Jody, you might run upstairs and see what on earth is keeping Cheryl."

"She may not be coming down for supper, Aunt Lettie," Jody informed her. "I don't think she's feeling well."

"Not feeling well, what makes you think so, Jody?" Jake asked with a concerned frown.

"Well, I found her crying in her room for one thing, and that certainly isn't normal for Cheryl," Jody asserted.

"When was that?" Lettie asked.

"This afternoon, after she returned from riding. And she almost bit my head off when I asked her where she had been."

"Oh dear, I hope she didn't get too much sun," Lettie sighed vexedly. "Well, perhaps I had better have a tray sent up to her room."

"That won't be necessary, Aunt Lettie," Cheryl interrupted from the hallway.

All eyes focused on the lovely girl as she entered the room, the proud lift of her elegant head belying her acute embarrassment.

Only Dave realized that Cheryl had overheard them discussing her, and only he knew the extent of her embarrassment, as well as the reason behind it. He silently willed her to look at him, and as their eyes met and held, Cheryl was aware of his amusement. A delicate flush appeared on her face, increasing her agitation. How she hated the man! He was thoroughly abominable.

"My goodness, Cheryl, we had just about given you up for dead," Jody laughed uncomfortably as Cheryl shot her a withering look.

"Quite so, my dear," Jake affirmed. "We were beginning to worry about you."

"I'm sorry, Papa," then to the Marshes, "I apologize for keeping you waiting."

"That's quite all right," Mr. Marsh remarked affably. "Just as long as you're here now."

"I trust you are feeling better?" Dave intervened. "Miss Jody told us you were feeling a trifle indisposed after your ride this afternoon. Nothing serious, I hope," he added with a mock seriousness.

She realized he was secretly laughing at her and she felt sure she had never met a more despicable man. Her blazing eyes related her true feelings for him, even as her lips sweetly murmured her reply.

"I'm feeling much better now, but it's so *sweet* of you to be concerned."

"Oh, but my dear, we were *all* quite concerned," Mrs. Marsh fluttered, suddenly sensing the tension in the atmosphere, but, like the others, not quite understanding it.

An uncomfortable silence fell upon the room until at last Jake cleared his throat uncertainly.

"Shall we adjourn to the dining room, everyone? I, for one, could eat a horse!" he blustered.

"Jake, really!" scolded Lettie as she took his offered arm.

"Well, by golly I could, Lettie! But if it's not being served, I reckon I'll settle for a hog instead!" he chuckled, mindless of her withering look.

The tension immediately faded and everyone laughed as they followed Jake into the dining room where he placed Lettie at one end of the long rectangular table, then seated himself at the other end. Dave was placed on his left, with Cheryl reluctantly taking her usual place which was next to him. The Marshes were on either side of Lettie, and Jody sat directly opposite Dave, so that he was able to study the girl without actually appearing to do so.

The delicious meal was accompanied by idle chatter, but in spite of Dave's efforts to converse occasionally with Cheryl, her monosyllabic responses cut him short. Jake was obviously one who preferred to eat first and talk later, so after several futile attempts in that direction, Dave concentrated on his food.

Glancing across the table, his glance fastened on Jody, and he once again berated himself for previously mistaking her for a boy. The little minx was really quite captivating. Neither woman nor child, her looks were just beginning to bloom, it was already apparent that in a very short time she would be a real beauty. Even now, he was forced to acknowledge that she was quite unique, with her long unruly black hair pulled back from the sides and falling loosely down her back and those enormous sea-green eyes giving her the appearance of a young gypsy.

Unlike Cheryl, who wore a sophisticated green silk gown with a daringly low-cut neckline, Jody wore a simple gown of pale yellow muslin which enhanced the golden hue of her tawny complexion. The scooped neck and short puff sleeves were edged with delicate lace, the bodice was quite plain, coming to a V-shaped point in front which accentuated the daintiness of her small waistline. She wore no jewelry, nor did she really need any. In

fact, the girl was delightfully enchanting just as she was, but he further speculated that it was a pity she was still so young and so damnably innocent.

"You got everything you need over at the cabin?" Jake suddenly asked, pushing aside his empty plate.

The question abruptly cut into Dave's thoughts, forcing him to return his attention to the conversation at hand.

"What? Oh—oh, yes, thank you. I believe I'll be quite comfortable," Dave replied.

"Good. But you're quite sure you wouldn't rather stay over here at the main house? We've plenty of room," Jake offered sincerely.

"No, I think it would be better if I stayed at the cabin; however, I certainly appreciate the offer."

"Well, if you change your mind, the offer will still be open," the older man reiterated with a grin as Lettie bristled and shot him a disapproving look.

"I declare, Papa, one would almost think Mr. Devan was an honored guest instead of just a hired hand," Cheryl remarked cattily.

"Cheryl!" Jody gasped, then looked apologetically towards Dave, who was smiling amusedly at her sister.

Even Lettie was shocked by the older girl's deliberate rudeness and quickly let her know it.

"Please excuse my niece's lack of manners, Mr. Devan. She apparently has forgotten them, along with the fact that you are a guest at our table, as well as a—personal friend of her father."

Jake's scowl faded as he sent his sister a look of appreciation.

"Quite so, my dear, quite so," he reaffirmed, then deliberately changed the subject. "By the way, Dave, I'm gonna be tied up for the next few months, buying supplies and catching up on a lot of neglected paperwork. So I thought I would just let Jody help you out some, at least until you get used to running the place on an even keel. Any objections to being instructed by a female for a little while?"

Dave smiled, amused not so much by what Jake sug-

gested as by the frown which had suddenly appeared on Cheryl's face.

"None at all. I'm quite sure Miss Jody is well qualified to teach me whatever I might need to know."

"That she is, my boy. Fact is, I 'spect she could just about run this place as well as I can, if she ever had to," Jake proudly boasted.

Lettie's displeasure over this speculation was obvious as she abruptly arose from the table and tightly suggested to her brother that they adjourn to the parlor. A short time later, after the men had enjoyed their cigars on the veranda and then rejoined the ladies, Mrs. Marsh was called upon to play the pianoforte and she graciously assented. Within minutes, everyone had gathered around to sing familiar ballads. Dave's deep baritone voice blended so well with Jody's clear soprano that Mrs. Marsh suggested, and everyone quickly agreed, that the two of them should sing a duet.

Forced to comply with their wishes, Jody blushed confusedly as Dave gently propelled her closer to the pianoforte, then proceeded to select the ballads which could most easily be harmonized.

Unaccustomed to being shoved into the background, a perplexed frown creased Cheryl's smooth forehead while she was forced to sit and listen politely. It somehow irritated her that the odious man seemed oblivious to everyone except Jody, as song after song, their voices blended in perfect harmony. Choking with resentment, she finally rose and walked out to the veranda, her departure unnoticed by all, save one. One whose dark eyes sparkled diabolically as he watched her leave.

Thoroughly disturbed for reasons which she could not understand, Cheryl restlessly sauntered towards the garden. She tried to ease her tension by thinking of Steve, but it was the arrogant stranger instead who persisted in invading her troubled mind. She recalled his insolent rudeness to her only hours before and silently reiterated that he was the most despicable man she had ever had the misfortune to meet. Completely detestable. And yet, there was something about him—something undefinable which

fascinated as well as repelled her, she reluctantly admitted.

So intense was her train of thought, that she was oblivious of another's presence until, finally, he cleared his throat. Startled, Cheryl whirled around to find, much to her dismay, that she was suddenly almost face to face with the very object of her confused thoughts.

"You!" she spat out. "What are you doing out here?"

"Now, is that any way to treat an *honored* guest?" Dave rebuked mockingly.

"I *don't* consider you a guest, honored or otherwise! And as far as I'm concerned, we have absolutely nothing in common and even less to discuss, so please step aside and let me pass," she commanded haughtily.

"Why, my *dear* Miss Alan, I do believe you wish to avoid my company," he derided, "or is it simply that you're afraid?" he added contemptuously.

"Afraid! I assure you, Mr. Devan, I am not afraid of any man, and certainly not you!"

"No, I daresay you're not," Dave chuckled amusedly. "You're quite different from other ladies of my acquaintance."

"Which have been many, I'm sure," Cheryl remarked scornfully.

"Enough, but as I just said, none of them quite like you."

Dark eyes studied Cheryl's heart-shaped face, lingering meaningfully on the small rosebud mouth before continuing downwards to rest on the tempting swelling of her well-rounded breasts. That she was angry was evidenced by her agitated breathing, though she stood motionless before him, as though mesmerized by the intensity of his rakish stare.

"Who are you?" she whispered hoarsely. "You're not an ordinary overseer, so why are you here? What do you want?"

"Who am I? Many things, most of which you have already undoubtedly been informed. A gambler by trade, a rake at heart and," he softly chuckled, "a blackguard whenever necessary! A thoroughly contemptible scoun-

drel, as I'm sure you have already guessed. Nevertheless, before you stands a man with a very definite purpose, that purpose being to eventually own the biggest plantation east of the Mississippi. *Plantation, hell!* Nothing less than an empire will do! An empire worthy of handing down to my sons."

Cheryl shivered, her confused mind shying away from the implication of his words, afraid of even attempting to analyze his meaning. He disturbed her in a way no other man ever had, his brute strength and fierce determination overwhelming her so that she was rendered speechless while he softly continued.

"Sons worthy of the name Devan, born with the intelligence to rule such an empire wisely and the shrewdness to know how to hold on to it for future generations. Only the *right* kind of a woman could ever bear me such sons; a woman strong in will and strong in body, passionate enough to satisfy my needs as well as her own and ambitious enough to share my dreams. *A woman such as you, perhaps!*"

His bold assumption that she would even be interested in his future, much less share it with him, angered Cheryl to the point that she quickly regained her speech.

"You want an empire simply because you believe it will give you power and, what is more to the point, respectability. Well, you can't buy respect, Mr. Devan, nor will you ever have mine, much less my love. You're a fool if you think I'd ever marry you!"

Dave's eyes blazed angrily as he towered above her. His anger faded quickly, however, and was replaced with a diabolical grin.

"I don't recall marriage having been mentioned," he taunted, "nor is it necessarily a must, at least as far as I'm concerned!"

Cheryl gasped with shock, then without contemplating the consequences, once more she lashed out at his face. This time, however, Dave was quicker, catching her hand in mid-air and bringing it down so forcefully that she was unexpectedly jerked to him.

"I allowed you to get away with that this afternoon, but

for your own sake, don't try me too far. You might get more than you bargained for."

The menacing threat behind his soft-spoken words was all too clear. Frantically, Cheryl struggled to free herself from his grasp, but as her hands beat ineffectively against his broad chest, arms of steel tightened around her narrow waist, binding her to him until she was crushed against the hardness of his lean body. A wave of alarm washed over her as she recognized the smoldering lust in his eyes and became disturbingly aware of his masculine strength.

Dave gave a soft throaty chuckle as he saw Cheryl's lovely eyes widen with the dawning realization of her predicament. Lowering his head to hers, he deliberately began teasing her with provocative kisses, his firm mouth brushing over her hair, her eyes and face, the soft hollow of her slender neck, but always avoiding the soft mouth which now quivered expectantly.

Betrayed by the sudden awakening of her own sexual desire, Cheryl's breathing quickened, so that even as she fought him, Dave knew she was weakening. It was only when she had ceased struggling altogether that he finally released her.

For a seemingly breathless moment, Cheryl stood motionless before him, her arrogant pride battling futilely against the sensual demands of her body. His vibrant virility, the very warmth of his nearness, aroused in her a need which no longer could be denied. Though he neither spoke nor moved, Dave's dark eyes silently compelled her to surrender. Slowly, Cheryl's arms wound around his neck and, arching her back, she wantonly molded her body to his.

Strong arms tightened around her, pulling her even closer, until firm breasts jutted sharply against his chest, quickly captivating his attention. Skillfully, he eased his hand down the front of Cheryl's gown and fondled one of the full mounds, his fingers probing, deliberately teasing the nipple until it hardened beneath his touch. Then, carefully extracting it from the confining bodice and cupping it in his large hand, he lowered his head and lightly

brushed his lips over the smooth roundness of her flesh. He felt her tremble as his tongue lingeringly explored the full contour of her breast, his tongue flicking repeatedly over the distended nipple until she was writhing against him with complete abandonment. He was only vaguely aware of the pain her long nails were inflicting on the back of his taut neck until, moments later, he gently returned the delectable bosom to the confines of her gown and felt her fingers tighten as if in protest.

No longer able to control his own mounting passion, Dave savagely took Cheryl's mouth, demanding a response even as his tongue parted her soft lips and thrust forward to probe the inner warmth of her mouth. She hesitated briefly, then with a low moan of sensual pleasure, hungrily responded to his kiss. As her small tongue darted forth exploringly, a searing pain shot through his loins and he had to stifle a groan.

She was clinging to him now, willingly thrusting herself even closer to his hard leanness so that, had it not been for her many layers of skirts, she would have felt the expanding bulge of his manhood. In her innocence, however, Cheryl was oblivious of danger, unaware that she was tempting him almost beyond endurance.

A man of less self-control would have taken her then and there, but Dave had no intention of succumbing to the temptation. He wanted her, physically needed the release which only she could give, but he also intuitively knew that now was neither the time nor the place to take what she was so innocently offering.

To be sure, there had been numerous occasions when he had hurriedly taken other women, rolling them in the grass, cheaply rented rooms, or wherever opportunity allowed. A hurried affair with Cheryl, however, was out of the question. She was different from the rest, not merely a plaything to be used then lightly discarded, but the woman he was now more than ever determined to marry—the sooner, the better. Despite her willingness, Dave instinctively knew that should he exploit her virginity now, Cheryl would come to resent or even hate him for taking advantage of her vulnerability. Far better to

await the right time when, as her husband, he could leisurely enjoy the unexplored pleasures of her sensual body without having to chance later recriminations.

The decision finally made, Dave reluctantly pried Cheryl's arms from his neck and held her at arms-length, his dark eyes never leaving her face. Seeing her sudden look of bewilderment, a perturbed sigh escaped him as he vexedly shook his head.

"You, my love, are entirely *too* tempting for your own damn good," he muttered thickly.

His admonishing rejection quickly brought Cheryl back to her senses, filling her with shame and self-loathing which was second only to the overwhelming hatred she felt for him. Defiantly she glared at him, her anger fast mounting to dangerous proportions.

"You'll never have me, Dave Devan—never!" she vowed furiously.

Mischief danced in Dave's eyes and, lifting a dark brow, a rakish grin broke over his handsome face.

"What an ungrateful little hypocrite you are!" he mockingly accused.

"Ungrateful!"

"Yes, ungrateful," he reiterated with feigned seriousness. "Why, had it not been for my gentlemanly sense of honor, you, my sweet, would have just lost your precious maidenly virtue, though I must say, you didn't seem too worried about it at the time."

"Oh—you—you low-down, despicable, insufferable, barbaric—"

"You needn't go further. I think I get the gist of what you're trying to say," he chuckled before adding more seriously, "although your opinion of me isn't going to change a damned thing. The point is that I happen to want you, and when the time is right, by God, I intend to have you!"

It was no idle threat and Cheryl knew it. Jerking free of his grasp, she backed away from him, fear and revulsion clearly etched on her delicate features.

"Never," she swore in a vehement whisper, "I'd rather die than let you ever touch me again!"

"That, my dear, I find extremely hard to believe, in view of your recent—ah—display of passion. But to prevent you from entertaining any thoughts of self-destruction, I guess I'll just have to wait until you're woman enough to come to me of your own volition—*which you will!*"

Speechless with rage, Cheryl turned and, with as much dignity as possible, started back to the house. Unhurried footsteps followed behind and a soft chuckle faintly reached her ears, mocking the futility of her defiance even as she strove to elude him by quickening her pace. Inexplicably she felt trapped, for though he was still at a distance, she could seemingly feel the warmth of his powerful body, could feel his overwhelming masterfulness engulfing her even now, demanding her acquiescence of the inevitable. Her cheeks burned hotly with the inadvertent remembrance of warm lips on her breast, and her shame intensified painfully with the appalling revelation of her own willing surrender. Such had been his powerful influence over her and, she feared, would be again—when ever and wherever he decided to exert his dominance over her. It was a frightening realization but not, she decided, an inevitable fact!

Silently she vowed that as long as there was breath in her body she would never give in to him again. Where there was a will, there was always a way and she was determined to find it.

In the recesses of her scheming mind, a plan slowly began to form, which centered around Steve Blake. She knew that he desired her and, with the *right* kind of persuasion, she was quite sure she could inveigle him into marrying her, with or without his mother's blessing! After all, she reasoned, many a woman had in advance traded her virginity for a wedding ring. At least as Steve's wife, she would be perfectly safe from the likes of Dave Devan and that in itself would more than justify any means she might be forced to use, moral or otherwise. For at this point, she felt quite prepared to go to any lengths to escape him—whatever the cost or outcome!

Chapter IV

During those first six months Jody proved to be a bigger help to Dave than he had expected, whereas he caught on to managing the place far more quickly than she had anticipated. She soon realized that it would not be long before there would be any more to teach him. She dreaded for the time to arrive, knowing that, once on his own, the daily companionship would cease. He'd no longer need her and this was worrying Jody far more than she dared admit.

Dave had turned out to be an apt pupil, quick to learn and amenable to advice, even though it was given by a mere slip of a girl. By using Jody's persuasive methods in handling the slaves, he soon turned out to be a perfect taskmaster, combining fairness with firmness. The industrious ones now eagerly put forth maximum effort in hopes of gaining the new boss man's approval, not to mention the added incentive of an extra piece of fatback or hogjowl in their greens or peas at mealtime as a reward for their work. Even the more indolent fieldhands, though still not overly productive, at least gave the appearance of trying somewhat harder, and their slow shuffling steps noticeably picked up to a fast trot whenever Dave was anywhere near.

By October the fieldhands were picking cotton, loading

it onto the mule-drawn wagons and carting it to the small gin at the north end of the field. There the lint was carefully removed and the cotton baled.

Pickin' time was always a happy time for the slaves, since they unanimously preferred pickin' cotton to plantin' or choppin' it. With the arrival of fall, the weather became cooler and, as their spirits invariably lifted, melodious voices rang out in age-old spirituals which cheerfully sounded across the vast white-speckled fields while thousands of the fluffy bolls were deftly picked by dexterous black hands.

Suddenly on a brisk November day, the singing stopped, and was replaced by an ominous chant. Grinning black faces simultaneously became somber. The mysterious change was particularly noticeable among the younger blacks who appeared to be openly resentful towards authority; even the older slaves had become unusually impassive. Some seemed almost hostile; others appeared to be afraid.

Planters began fearing another insurrection such as the one which had taken place in Virginia in '31, a massacre that had been sparked off by a Negro preacher named Nat Turner. The revolt had gotten so out of hand that numerous whites, including women and children, had been slaughtered unmercifully. Though slave codes had tightened considerably since then, the underlying threat of other slave uprisings was always present. Unspoken fears lurked in everyone's mind while the impending danger continued to mount.

Even Jody was apprehensive about the change in the blacks, not only in the fieldhands but in the houseservants as well. She had noted that the most trustworthy ones, including the favored Mammy Lou and Uncle Thad, were also unusually sullen, as though fearful of some expected catastrophe which they were either powerless to prevent or too afraid of to mention. This in itself was strange, for Mammy Lou was literally second in command at Belle Terre, answerable only to the family matriarch, Aunt Lettie. Jake might be master, but Mammy Lou was boss! Not even Jake disputed her formidable authority over the

household. Like everyone else, he catered to her wishes, overlooked her usual brusqueness and adhered to her unerring judgment. She, like Uncle Thad, had been born and reared at Belle Glen, and both were considered to be a part of the family.

Jody mentioned her fears to Dave one afternoon after they had inspected the fields and were riding back to the house. She finished by allowing that perhaps she was allowing her imagination to get the better of her, but if she had hoped that Dave would allay her fears, she was soon disappointed.

"I don't think your imagination has anything to do with it," he flatly refuted. "If you were imagining things, then I reckon half the folks around these parts are imagining the same things you are."

"But, Dave, surely they're not thinking of revolting. Not *our* slaves at Belle Glen! Oh, I know they're moody right now, but they've always been like children, happy one minute and sullen the next. Why—in a few days, whatever is troubling them will have probably blown over."

"I hope you're right, Jody, but somehow I don't think it's that simple. For instance, Uncle Thad hasn't said more than ten words to me this week, although I get the feeling that he would confide in me, if he weren't so damned scared."

"Do you mean that you actually think Uncle Thad knows what's going on? But what makes you think so?" Jody asked incredulously.

"I can't put my finger on it exactly, but I'm willing to bet my last dollar he does. I can see it in his eyes. The apprehension and, above all, the fear. Did you know that you can usually get a pretty good picture of a man's character by just looking into his eyes. A man's soul is reflected in his eyes, or so I've heard tell."

Jody, eager to shake off her depression and enjoy the rest of their ride, gave him an impish smile before mischievously retorting:

"Then you must have a very black soul, indeed!"

"So I've been told many times, most recently by your own sister," Dave replied.

Jody shot him a curious glance before finally asking her next question, one which caught him by surprise.

"Why can't you and Cheryl get along better? I mean, she's always so catty to you, and you—well, you always seem to be laughing at her, or at least at something that only you and she know about. What is it?"

Dave chuckled and eyed her curiously. "So you've noticed that, have you?"

"Yes, I have." A frown creased her brow as a sudden unwelcome thought occurred. "You don't like her, do you? I mean, you aren't becoming attracted to her, are you?"

"You, my little minx, are too curious," came the soft rebuke.

Embarrassed by the gentle reprimand, Jody hid her bruised feelings and quickly changed the subject.

"Well, if you can tell so much about people by just looking into their eyes, then precisely what type of a person do you think I am, Mr. Know-it-all," she asked flip-pantly.

Dave, with mock seriousness, looked down into her sparkling green eyes, an amused smile slowly quirking the corners of his wide mouth.

"A little wildcat!"

"Oh, you would say something horrid like that!" flared Jody. "I suppose you think that Cheryl is simply a little angel, with those big blue eyes of hers!"

"Oh, I'd hardly say that," laughed Dave.

"Then what *do* you think of her?"

"Like I said, Jody, you're too damned nosey!"

Unaccountably irritated by Dave's refusal to satisfy her curiosity, Jody spurred her mount forward and galloped towards the house. She had not gone far when her horse unexpectedly stumbled, catching her so off-guard that in the next instant she was pitched flying into the air.

Moments later, Jody regained consciousness to find Dave kneeling beside her, his strong arms cradling her

badly bruised body in such a way that she was pressed tightly to him.

"Jody—Jody, are you all right?"

Had she been able, Jody would have tried to reassure him, but as it was, she was far too winded to speak and could only gaze helplessly into the black eyes which now regarded her anxiously. An acute awareness of his warmth, the very hardness of his powerful body, pervaded her senses and, nuzzling her face against his broad chest, she suddenly felt inexplicably happy. Neither headache nor bruises mattered. Nothing mattered other than the man who was holding her in his arms, showing a concern for her that she had never dreamed he was capable of feeling.

"For God's sake, Jody, say something!" Dave muttered hoarsely. "Are you all right?"

"I—I think so," came the breathless reply. "Just a little shaken up."

"Thank God!" Dave groaned. So great was his relief that, without thinking, he buried his face in the thick abundance of her disheveled hair. "Damn it, don't ever do that again!"

Despite her personal discomfort, Jody rallied to the occasion and, with an impish grin, trailed a finger playfully across Dave's heaving chest.

"And just what is it you don't want me to do again?" she whispered teasingly.

Her deliberate coyness snapped Dave back to his senses and, putting her from him, he gave her a murderous look.

"You know damned well what!" came the explosive reply. In spite of his obvious anger, however, he gently assisted Jody to her feet before adding, "I ought to give you a good spanking for thundering off like that, and so help me God, if you ever do it again, I sure as hell will!"

Irritated that he was treating her like a child, Jody met his hostile gaze defiantly.

"You'd just better never try to!" she challenged.

"I won't try—I'll do it, and that's a promise!" he threatened menacingly before remounting and extending a

hand to her. "Well, are you just going to stand there all day, or would you rather walk back?" he asked sarcastically.

Jody looked around and was suddenly faced with the realization that her mount had already cantered back to the house. Reluctantly taking Dave's hand, she felt herself lifted with a jerk and placed in front of him.

The silence on the way back seemed deafening to Jody, with Dave holding her so tightly that she could hardly breathe. Relief swamped over her as they finally reached the front veranda, but even then Dave refused to relinquish his hold on her. Lifting Jody from the saddle, he carried her through the front door and, ignoring her protests, continued up the winding staircase.

"Which room is yours?" he asked gruffly.

"You can put me down now. I assure you that I'm quite able to walk to my own room, *Mr. Devan*."

"The only thing you seem able to do, *Miss Alan*, is to get into trouble, and *that* you seem to be able to do damned well! Now, which room?"

Jody sputtered helplessly, then pointed belligerently towards her bedroom.

It was just as Dave was roughly depositing Jody on her bed that Mammy Lou shuffled by, stopped, then quickly retraced her steps to Jody's bedroom door, with an outraged expression on her black face.

"Mis't Dave! What you doing in dis heah chile's room? Shame on you! You ain' got no biz'ness in heah t'all," she sharply scolded, all the time shooing him towards the door.

"I quite agree, Mammy Lou, though I guarantee you I have *no* designs on *that* little hellcat's virtue!" Angrily, Dave strode out into the hall where he almost collided with Lettie.

"Really, *Mr. Devan*! What on earth are you doing in my niece's bedroom?"

Dave brushed the back of his hand across his forehead and groaned vexedly.

"I assure you, Miss Lettie, my intentions, though obviously misguided, were quite honorable. Your niece," he

spat, only barely controlling his temper, "was thrown from her horse. As far as my being in her bedroom, I was merely trying to save her a few painful steps, nothing more."

Although not completely pacified, Lettie shortly thanked him, then wheeled into the bedroom to see for herself the extent of Jody's injuries.

It was sometime later before Jake looked in on his daughter, checking on her to make sure that she was really all right. Seating his large bulk on the side of her bed, he scrutinized her closely before a slow grin finally displaced the troubled scowl on his normally jovial face.

"Hear you had a little mishap, daughter," he remarked. "Feeling any better?"

Jody quickly assured him that she did, but added irritably, "It wouldn't have happened in the first place if it hadn't been for that hateful man you insist on befriending."

"Dave?" he exclaimed with surprise. "Well, now that's right peculiar, 'cause to hear him tell it, you were riding that horse of yours like a bat out of hell! Couldn't be that you two have had a little fallin' out, now could it?"

"Little is hardly the word," sniffed Jody, her lovely eyes suddenly brimming with unshed tears. "It was more like an all-out battle."

Jake saw her ill-concealed distress and, gently taking her small hand in his own, gave her a benevolent smile.

"Been mistreatin' you, has he?" he asked, knowing in advance that Dave was guilty of no such crime.

"No, it isn't really that, Pa," Jody conceded lamely. "Its just that—" She stopped, searching for her next words.

"Just what?"

"It's just that he treats me like a child, and—and I don't like it," came the belligerent reply.

"Oh, I see. Well now, seems to me that you haven't minded the way he's treated you in the past."

"Well, I mind, now. I'm *not* a child! Why—why my own mother was only fifteen when you married her," Jody

exploded. "Besides, he doesn't treat Cheryl that way," she added moodily.

"No, he doesn't," Jake chuckled, "but you could hardly say that they get along exactly well together, now could you?"

A small smile trembled on Jody's lips as she gave her father's hand a quick squeeze.

"I guess not. But at least he looks at her like she's a woman. He doesn't look at me at all! Or if he does, all he sees is—is—well, just an object that happens to be there for his convenience, like a piece of furniture or something!"

"And who's fault is that, missy?" was the provoking reply.

Jody hung her head dejectedly, then muttered, "Mine, I suppose."

Jake lifted her chin with a fat forefinger and peered down into her suspiciously bright eyes. Seeing the despair and uncertainty in their innocent depths, he sighed.

"Let me tell you something, daughter. When Dave first came here, I had it in mind that he and Cheryl would make a good match, but it seems like I was mistaken. Why, those two would make each other miserable within a year's time. Too darned stubborn, both of them. Marriage is a two-way proposition. You gotta be able to give as well as take, and that's something that sister of yours has never learned to do. She's not much on giving, I'm afraid."

"And Dave? Is he a—a giver?"

Jake snorted, giving her pert nose a tweak. "Dave's a man who'd give as much as he was given, but not a damned inch more. I can't see him putting up with Cheryl's selfishness any more than I would. Some men might, but not Dave."

Jody quietly considered her father's words while he momentarily took respite in lighting his pipe before continuing.

"Still, I'm not counting him out as a son-in-law yet," he puffed. "No sir, if Dave were to suddenly take an interest

in you, missy, that would be an altogether different proposition."

"Well, it's pretty obvious that he isn't, and I doubt seriously that he ever will," was the bitter reply. "All I am to him, apparently, is just a nuisance!"

"Oh, I'd hardly say that, honey. Why, just the other day Dave was telling me what a big help you are to him."

"Huh! That's a great comfort. It'd be nice if, just once, he'd notice that I'm a girl!"

"And maybe he would, if you'd ever give him the chance."

"But, Pa, I do dress up—every night for supper," Jody declared indignantly, then muttered a resentful addition, "Aunt Lettie sees to that."

"And so she should, my girl. Like Lettie says, it *is* high time you started lookin' and actin' like a young lady instead of a little roustabout. I guarantee one thing—no man is going to look twice at any tomboy, least of all Dave."

"But Pa, he doesn't even notice me when I *do* dress up," argued Jody stubbornly.

"Well, no wonder, considering those old clothes you wear. Why, those gowns make you look like a little girl. Don't you have anything that's more—" he floundered.

"Well, Aunt Lettie did have some new gowns made for me not long ago, but I'd feel funny wearing that kind of get-up. I mean, I would feel just ridiculous wearing fancy clothes like that," she finished lamely.

"Why? I daresay that anything would be an improvement over what you *have* been wearing.

"But all of my new clothes are so grownup, so sophisticated! Just like the ones Cheryl wears. That's not me, Pa. I could never look half as pretty as Cheryl, anyway. She's so delicate and so—so pretty," Jody ended wistfully.

"And you think that you're not, is that it? Let me tell you something, daughter, don't sell yourself short. You'd be a damned pretty woman if you'd take the same pains with your looks that your sister does. Gawd almighty, anyone who preens in front of a looking glass as much as Cheryl does is bound to look pretty! But do you do that?

No sir! Instead, you spend half of your time gallivantin' around on the backside of a horse!"

"Maybe you're right, Pa. I don't know. I just want to be myself, but being myself doesn't seem good enough anymore."

Jake put his arm around Jody's slim shoulders and gave her an affectionate hug. It was at times like this that he wished the girls still had their mother, particularly Jody. Now, more than ever, he was acutely aware of the younger girl's vulnerability.

"Being yourself is plenty good enough for me, honey, but it never hurts to add the extra trimmings, too, you know. A man naturally likes those feminine touches, just as he appreciates a certain amount of helplessness in a woman. Makes him feel more of a man, I suppose."

"Oh, Pa, you're wonderful!" Jody laughed, suddenly throwing both arms around his broad neck and giving him a fierce hug. "I don't know what I'd ever do without you."

"Probably just as you damned well pleased," Jake blustered, embarrassed but nevertheless pleased. "That is, unless you're married to a man like Dave who can keep you in line."

With a grunt Jake heaved himself off the bed. Taking her chin in his pudgy hand, he contemplated the lovely up-turned face for a moment before adding a parting remark.

"Just take my advice, honey, and I think you'll soon see quite a change in that young man's attitude towards you. Will you do that?"

"I promise," she smiled, "but it's not going to be easy!"

"Growing up never is," murmured Jake as he walked towards the door.

Chapter V

Cheryl sat huddled next to Steve in the open carriage which slowly made its way along the river road. A crisp breeze occasionally stirred through the night air, ruffling her long silver-blond hair, but for once she was completely unaware of her appearance, her mind now preoccupied by a more perplexing problem. Dave Devan!

Though Dave and Steve were the best of friends, it had not taken Cheryl long to discover that Dave resented Steve's constant attendance on her, just as she had hoped. If no one else had noticed this resentfulness, she most assuredly had, by the tone of his voice at times, the tightness around his arrogant mouth whenever he saw her with Steve and the occasional saracastic remarks directed at her when no one else could overhear. Since then he had seemed almost unmindful of her presence, not even bothering to spar with her across the supper table as he usually did. And, for once, he even seemed totally unaffected by Steve's taking her out for a buggy ride, a regular occurrence which had, without doubt, irritated him in the past. But not so tonight. Not in any way had he shown his usual resentfulness at Steve's escorting her out. Instead, he had merely wished them a pleasant ride and then ridden off for town, no doubt seeking relaxation over a game of poker, or worse, with one of the harlots who lived on

the waterfront. Could it possibly be that he was already losing interest in her?

The sudden realization of this possibility was quite unsettling to Cheryl, though for the life of her she could not have said why it should be. What difference did it make how Dave Devan felt about her anyway? Had she not hated him since the first time she laid eyes on him? Had she not sought to escape his obnoxious advances by seeking out Steve's company? And Steve, not suspecting her real reasons, had been most willing to conveniently be at her beck and call, though they had mutually agreed to avoid any further mention of matrimony; at least until Steve could find an honorable way out of his engagement to Emily. He had not exactly promised that he would break the engagement, but he had led her to believe that he would do so gladly, if the right opportunity ever presented itself. For the time being, that would simply have to suffice.

If Steve did not actually love her, Cheryl was quite sure that he wanted her. As for love—well, what was love? Something which probably would come after marriage, so it was not necessarily important at this particular stage in their relationship. It was enough for now that he wanted her.

Still, he was no nearer to proposing to her now than he had been six months ago, Cheryl decided irritably, so perhaps she should give him more incentive to want to break his engagement to Emily. It would certainly never do for Dave to lose interest in her before she had achieved her goal, which was to make Dave insanely jealous, to humiliate him just as much as he had humiliated her ever since he had come to Belle Glen, particularly that first night when he had made love to her in the garden. How she would enjoy making him suffer, how she would enjoy trampling that arrogant pride of his into the dust, once she was married to Steve.

As for Steve, he would make a better husband than most men. He understood her and usually catered to her every whim. If she was not actually in love with him, she could learn to love him later, after they were married.

As they reached the top of a rise which rendered a particularly lovely view of the river, Cheryl tugged at Steve's arm and begged him to stop the carriage.

"I don't know, Cheryl. With a possible slave uprising brewing, we probably should not have ridden out so far tonight, anyway," he mildly objected.

"Slaves, slaves, slaves!" Cheryl snapped. "I'm so sick and tired of hearing about slaves from morning till night that I could positively scream! You're just using that as an excuse to frighten me!"

"You know better than that, Cheryl. Why on earth would I want to frighten you?"

"Because—because you don't want to stop here. You want to take me home. Well, isn't that so?" came the pouting reply.

"Of course not. If I hadn't wanted to be with you, I wouldn't have brought you out here at all," Steve argued, but seeing the stubborn lift of her chin, he knew that he was beaten. "Oh, all right. We'll stop here for a moment, but we really mustn't stay long."

Cheryl, happy at having gotten her way, cast him a flirtatious smile.

"Well, aren't you going to help me out of the carriage?" she asked sweetly.

"Now, honey, you shouldn't be getting out of the carriage. It's all muddy out there, and besides, you can see the river just as well from here."

"Oh, Steve, please."

"All right, Cheryl, but if you slip and hurt yourself, don't blame me. I warned you," Steve grumbled as he jumped out of the carriage and assisted her in alighting. It was useless for him to fight her, and he knew it. She was the one person, the only person actually, whom he had never been able to deny or disappoint.

By the tight expression on Steve's face, Cheryl knew she had again irritated him with her willfulness, but she also knew exactly how to pacify him. With her eyes meekly downcast and an appealing smile on her rosebud lips, she clung helplessly to his arm.

"I'm not worried, Steve, not as long as you're here."

Why, nothing could ever harm me as long as I'm with you!"

She felt him relax as, smiling down at her, he lightly patted the small hand on the crook of his arm. It was at this point that Cheryl cunningly pretended to stumble.

Instinctively Steve's arm shot out to steady her, but somehow ended up encircling her tiny waist instead, protectively drawing her close to him.

"Are you all right?" he asked worriedly as he saw her pretentious grimace.

"I—I think I must have twisted my ankle," she murmured, leaning helplessly against him.

For a moment their eyes met intimately, relaying a message which needed no words as Steve's arms unwittingly tightened around her. His mouth found hers, at first hesitantly, then savagely, hungrily devouring the sweetness of her lips as they softened and parted invitingly beneath his own. Cheryl's arms possessively encircled his taut neck, her soft body willfully yielding to the demanding pressure of his.

"You do want me, I know you do," she whispered ecstatically, "and you must know that I can give you what Emily never could."

The implication of her words brought Steve sharply back to his senses and he put her from him so abruptly that she almost fell.

"No, Cheryl, no! Not like this. God knows I want you, but we've got to wait until I can find a way to—to—" he faltered helplessly.

"To what?" she gritted, suddenly despising him for his weakness. "To what, break your engagement with that stupid cousin of yours? And just how long is that going to take, may I ask? Forever?"

"Of course not, honey. If you could just be patient a little longer," he pleaded.

"And why should I be?" snapped Cheryl. "You don't love me at all, really. You just happen to want me. If you loved me, you'd have broken your silly engagement long ago."

Steve tried to reason with her, pleading with her for

understanding, but to no avail. Both were so intent upon arguing that neither heard the rustling sound which came from nearby bushes, nor saw the three black men who were stealthily creeping up on them. A twig snapped, causing Steve to glance over his shoulder just before he was attacked from behind. Hearing Cheryl's hysterical scream, he fought wildly and managed to free himself for a brief second.

"Take the buggy, Cheryl. For God's sake, get out of here!" he shouted, knocking one black away from her before the other two jumped him again.

Terrified, Cheryl flew to the buggy, but just as she reached it, a strong black arm encircled her waist. With a scream, she jerked around and wildly clawed at his face. Cursing, he loosened his grip so that she was able to break free of his menacing grasp.

The horses shied nervously as Cheryl climbed into the buggy, but even as she reached for the reins, the huge black was grabbing for her again. Instinctively she jerked up the whip and lashed out at him, her aim accurately finding its mark. With a loud howl, her assailant fell to the ground and writhed with pain.

Cheryl lost no time in taking up the reins, unmercifully whipping the two nervous bays into a frantic gallop as she raced for home. All the way back, she was silently praying that she could get help to Steve in time. But what if she were too late? Here her mind balked, the possibilities of Steve's fate being too horrible to contemplate should she fail.

Tears were streaming down Cheryl's face by the time she finally reached Belle Glen. Jumping out of the buggy, she ran screaming up the veranda steps, quickly arousing the entire household. As she hysterically blurted out the horrible details, Jake grimly buckled his gun holster and reached for his shotgun.

"Jake, wait until Dave gets back. We'll send word to him by Uncle Thad. You can't handle it by yourself," pleaded Lettie.

"The day I can't protect my own daughter's safety is the day I'll cease to breathe!" Jake snapped.

"Oh, Papa, you've just got to help Steve. Do you think they've killed him?" Cheryl wailed.

"Let's hope not, honey. I'm gonna do what I can, I promise," he tried to comfort her, then turned to Lettie. "Go on and send Thad for help. I 'spect I'll be needing it." Reminding her to check and see that all the doors and windows were locked, Jake kissed both women and stalked out of the house.

Jody, hearing all the commotion, had trailed halfway down the stairs in her nightgown. Quickly grasping the situation, she ran back to her room, threw off her nightgown and pulled on her faded riding breeches and shirt.

Minutes later she was running down the stairs and, before Lettie could protest, racing towards the stables. After she had quickly saddled her horse, she galloped at a breakneck speed for town.

She was almost certain that she would find Dave in one of the gambling houses on the waterfront. But which one, she wondered. After having inquired his whereabouts at two saloons, she finally got results at the third, as the saloonkeeper hesitantly informed her that Dave had been there earlier, but had left with Lil Benton about an hour ago.

"But where did they go? I've got to know!" she desperately implored. "We're having trouble with the slaves over at our place and we need him."

The saloonkeeper quickly realized that the girl's anxiety was real and, though reluctantly, he informed her that Lil's place was down on the wharf.

"But, miss, I wouldn't go there if'n I wuz you. Let me see if I can find someone to run down there for you," he offered worriedly, but his offer fell on deaf ears as Jody ran out the door.

Had Jody not been so worried about her father's safety, she would never have gathered the courage to go down on the wharf alone, particularly at night. She would never have gone into a saloon to begin with, for it had humiliated and embarrassed her to find everyone staring at her as though she had taken leave of her senses. Now, she was faced with the further humiliation of seeking Dave

out in some whore's house. She trembled angrily, the very thought of Dave's having an affair with such a woman suddenly nauseating her.

Seeing a drunk stumbling along the boardwalk, Jody yelled out and asked him for directions to Lil Benton's place. The besotted man stared dumbly at her for a moment before finally pointing to the only white house along the wharf.

Jody reined in her mare and dismounted, hesitating for only a moment before running up on the front porch. Shoving all pride aside, she banged loudly on the door.

There was no answer at first, but after a few more persistent bangs, a voluptuous woman clad in only a loose wrapper opened the door. Her quizzical expression as well as her provocative appearance only added fuel to the fire as far as Jody was concerned. Angrily Jody swept past her into the house without waiting to be asked. Disdain was clearly etched on her youthful face as she coldly asked:

"Is Dave Devan here?"

Before Lil could frame an answer, Jody walked briskly over to what she correctly assumed to be the bedroom door and threw it open. Her breath caught in her throat as she realized with a start that Dave was in the process of pulling on his trousers, his broad chest bare and gleaming in the pale moonlight which filtered through the flimsy curtains. It did not take long for her to realize that he was furious at being caught in such an uncompromising predicament.

"What the hell are you doing here, Jody?"

"I—I assure you I wouldn't be here if we didn't need you," came the bitter retort. "Cheryl and Steve were attacked by some blacks on the river road. Pa thinks it might be an uprising."

While Dave grimly threw on his shirt, she filled him in on the details with as few words as possible. Anger and embarrassment choked her, making any attempt at conversation extremely difficult.

"Why in God's name didn't Jake send someone else? It

was a damned fool thing for him to let you come!" he gritted as he quickly buckled his wide belt.

"Why? Because I'm not a man?" she glared defiantly.

"Not only that danger, but this is hardly the place for a lady," he shot back.

"Oh, is that what I am? I didn't think that you had noticed!" came the searing reply as Jody stomped out of the house.

The race for Belle Glen prevented further argument. When they finally reached the gate, Dave was strongly tempted to turn in and check on Cheryl. Worry clouded his mind when he visualized the possible harm which might have befallen her already. What if she had been molested? His mind refused to speculate further and he forcibly jerked his thoughts back to the present. Jake and Steve's welfare had to come first now.

To Dave's surprise, Jody did not turn in at the gate, but raced on past it. Inwardly he fumed. The damn girl had no sense whatsoever.

"Get on back to the house, Jody," Dave shouted angrily.

His only answer was her defiant glance as she suddenly shot past him. Dave muttered an oath as he attempted to catch up with her. How he would love to get his hands on her!

As they rounded a curve in the road, both saw a still form lying in the middle of it. It was Steve, unconscious and badly beaten, but at least not dead.

"Pa must have already been here and left. That's his coat under Steve's head," Jody stated grimly.

Dave bent down to examine Steve more closely, then his muscles visibly tightened. Slowly he straightened up and pointed towards the south.

"I smell smoke, Jody. That glow just beyond those trees over there—isn't that the Marsh place?"

Jody followed his stare, then gasped. Above the tall oaks, a red glare illuminated the otherwise dark sky.

"Oh, no!" she groaned. "Pa might be over there now!"

"Jody, take my derringer and get back to the house as fast as you can, then send help," he commanded. "I'll ride

over there, but I doubt that there is anything I can do for them now."

He instantly regretted his words, seeing that Jody was not only trembling, but unusually pale.

"Don't worry, Jake is probably at home right now and worrying himself sick over you," he added kindly.

But Jody knew Dave did not believe this any more than she did. Before he could stop her, she had remounted and was thundering down the road towards the ominous glow. With a vexed groan, he quickly mounted his horse and started after her. He would gladly have throttled her, had he been able to catch her!

Momentarily losing sight of her, he heard an agonizing scream as he rounded the curve which led to the house, or what was left of it. And what he saw made him ill, causing a cold sweat to pop out on his forehead.

On the veranda, dangling upside down and suspended from the balcony by crude ropes, were three grotesque figures which had been mutilated almost beyond recognition. And beneath those lifeless bodies Jody lay in a dead faint, her father's blood slowly dripping down to spatter all over her pathetically pale face.

Dave quickly gathered her into his powerful arms. Her paleness worried him, as did the shallowness of her breathing. As he wiped the blood from her forehead and cheeks, a wave of tenderness swept over him, an urgent need to protect her from the sorrow she had just experienced. He longed to comfort her, but knew that he could not. Such feelings were new to Dave and he was somewhat puzzled and surprised to discover how much he actually cared about the young girl he held in his arms.

After a few minutes, Jody's eyes fluttered open and she looked up at Dave in bewilderment. As her memory returned, her eyes went to the three suspended bodies and a scream tore from her tortured throat. Again and again she screamed until, finally, Dave had to slap her to bring her to her senses.

Jody looked at him, tears streaming down her cheeks as he pulled her to him.

"Hush, little one, hush," he murmured huskily. "I

promise you, no one will ever hurt you again. No one!" he swore vehemently.

Picking her up, he carried her to his horse, situating her in front of him. Cradling her in his arms, Dave started back to Belle Glen.

Shortly after Dave and Jody had ridden away from Steve, he had slowly regained consciousness. At first he was confused as to his whereabouts; then his memory painfully returned. As he attempted to get to his feet, a sharp pain shot through his head, blurring his vision momentarily. Leaning against a nearby tree, Steve steadied himself and tried to clear his fuzzy memory.

"Cheryl!" he hoarsely whispered. "Oh, my God, Cheryl!"

He knew he somehow had to get back to Belle Glen and find out if she had made it home safely. A groan escaped him as he imagined the worst. He suddenly noticed the glare beyond the trees which came from the direction of the Marshs' place but, realizing that he could not possibly help them in his present condition, he started for Belle Glen. Although he was not actually far from the Alans' plantation, it was a grueling walk. Weak and dizzy, sheer determination prodded him on, but by the time he reached the house, he felt violently ill. With the last ounce of his remaining strength, Steve banged loudly on the door, which was promptly opened by Lettie. Anxiously she helped him to the sofa in the parlor, quickly assuring him that Cheryl was upstairs and unharmed.

"Now just be still while I clean you up a bit. Doc Blanks is already upstairs with Cheryl and can attend to those cuts and bruises when he comes back downstairs," she informed him, then sent Mammy Lou for a basin of water.

Steve's eyes misted with tears of undisguised relief, though he was not totally convinced. Pushing Lettie aside, he shoved himself to his feet and clumsily climbed the stairs. As he softly slipped through the door of Cheryl's bedroom, he was unaware of the doctor who was seated in a dark corner of the dimly lit room. All he saw was

Cheryl's still form on the large canopy bed. The sob which involuntarily tore from his lips awakened her and she glanced fuzzily towards the door.

Whimpering his name, Cheryl stretched out her arms to him and in the next instant he was holding her tightly to him.

"Thank God you're safe," he muttered hoarsely. "You *are* all right, aren't you? They didn't—didn't—"

"No, no, they didn't hurt me. I'm quite all right. Are you?" she asked drowsily, the laudanum she had been given now taking a heavy toll on her senses, so that she never heard his reply.

Seeing that she was asleep, Steve allowed the doctor to bandage his head before reluctantly returning downstairs. He and Lettie were in the hall when the front door flew open and Dave stalked in, a still form cradled in his arms.

Upon seeing the dried blood on Jody's pale face, the last of Lettie's courage almost crumbled.

"Oh, dear Lord, what's happened to her?" she cried.

Steve quickly helped Lettie to a nearby chair while Dave laid the unconscious girl on the sofa. This done, he hesitantly turned his attention back to Lettie.

"Jody is all right, Miss Lettie, but—" He faltered, wondering how to soften the blow of Jake's death.

Lettie straightened her narrow shoulders, forcing a calm appearance to the surface which she was far from inwardly feeling.

"But what, young man? Please be more explicit. I assure you that I don't intend to faint," snapped the gallant lady as she braced herself for the next blow.

Nor did she faint, her tired blue eyes misting but never wavering from Dave's as he gently informed her of her brother's death. It had been his intention to spare her the ghastly details as much as possible, but when asked about the blood on Jody's face, he was compelled to tell her even that. She was spared nothing in the end.

Slowly Lettie got to her feet and, after thanking him for his help, tiredly asked him to take Jody to her room and see to it that the doctor looked in on her. Then, feeling

her composure dangerously weakening, she abruptly left the room.

Mammy Lou, who had been just outside in the hall and listening, silently followed her mistress up the stairs, tears of sorrow trickling down her fat ebony face. And even after Lettie had fallen asleep, she stoically sat by her mistress's bed, watching over her as though she were only a small child. Her huge body was silhouetted by the faint moonlight which drifted through the window and glistened on the unchecked tears which coursed down her cheeks. In the distance, her own people's mournful chanting intermingled eerily with the sounds of night.

Chapter VI

The next month passed slowly for Dave. With the coming of winter, his duties had slackened considerably and not having enough to occupy his mind, he became increasingly restless and moody.

The family had taken Jake's death hard, especially Jody. She had remained in shock for almost a week after her father's death and, when she finally emerged from her shell, she left something of the old Jody dead and buried in the past.

Dave had always considered her to be one of the friendliest people he knew, but now she was particularly cool and distant to him. At times he was certain that she deliberately avoided him, whereas in the past she had obviously gone out of her way to be with him. It seemed that the sunny, reckless girl he had once known was completely gone, replaced by a beautifully serene but unhappy young woman.

She was a stranger to everyone, no longer taking interest in any of her previous pastimes, but remaining in her bedroom for the most part. Occasionally she had supper downstairs with the family and, on rare occasions, saddled her mare and rode over to the Marshs' place. There she would sit under the old magnolia tree which shaded the front of the house, staring at what remained of the

scorched front porch. The house had been burned beyond recognition, but the terrifying memories of that tragic night would never be forgotten as far as Jody was concerned.

No one actually knew where Jody went on these rides and no one asked. It was such a relief that she was getting out again that where she went seemed unimportant. Even Cheryl, after nursing her own wounds and briefly blaming herself to some small extent for her father's death, became concerned over her sister's abnormal behavior.

Aunt Lettie had tried everything to bring Jody around, even to the extent of having another new wardrobe designed for her. After all, she reasoned, one in the family wearing black was quite enough and, since she was to be that one, she saw no reason for the girls to mourn the loss of their father in such drab colors. If she was breaking one of society's most rigid rules, it did not bother her in the least. Let others mourn in black, but her nieces most definitely would not.

But even after the new gowns were hung in Jody's wardrobe, her apathy persisted. The riding breeches and faded shirt were carefully folded and packed in an old trunk in the attic, as was her youth, or so it seemed. If only she could pack away her memories as easily, but it was not possible. Too clearly she remembered her father's confiding in her, encouraging her to try and be more ladylike. In fact, it had been the last request he ever made of her and, remembering this, she firmly resolved to be more ladylike in the future. If there were truly a heaven, then surely he would know and be pleased with her.

Her strong belief in a hereafter comforted her to some degree whenever she thought about her father, but there was no comfort to be found at all whenever she thought about Dave Devan. The painful memory of finding Dave half-naked in Lil Benton's bedroom often crossed her mind, each time increasing her total disgust with him and renewing her anger and inexplicable frustration. Nor would she ever forget how sharply he had spoken to her in front of his mistress, as though she were a child. The incident had been humiliating, and in order to push it

from her mind she avoided Dave as much as possible. She was determined to exclude him from her life, though not, perhaps, entirely from her heart.

It was about two weeks before Christmas when Dave saw her taking another one of her mysterious rides. Curious to know where she was going, he quickly mounted his horse and followed her at a safe distance, so as not to be detected. It came as a shock when he realized that she was headed for the Marshs' place. Not wishing his presence to be known, he quietly dismounted and tied his horse to a clump of bushes some distance from where Jody had tied hers. He had the uneasy feeling that it was unwise for her to be returning to the scene of the tragedy so soon after Jake's death, and yet he instinctively knew she would resent any interference. For that reason he decided upon silently watching her from a distance.

Jody sank to her knees under the magnolia tree and stared at the eerie remains of the house. Her bowed head and quivering shoulders conveyed the depth of her grief, and Dave knew that she was weeping bitterly. Unable to bear the sight of her suffering any longer, he softly walked over and gently laid his hand on her shoulder. Startled, she gasped and looked up at him with surprise, surprise which quickly turned to resentment.

"Jody, what happened here is past and over. You must pull yourself together and try to go on living. You have your whole life ahead of you, and I know Jake wouldn't want you to torture yourself like this. Besides, it isn't safe for you to come here. Some of the slaves might still be on the place. Not all of the runaways have been brought in yet."

This much was true, for though only about a hundred slaves in the area had actually participated in the uprising, better than half of them were still missing. Jody, however, was too angry to consider the wisdom behind his warning. As far as she was concerned, he had no right to follow her, much less give her advice.

"Surely, Mr. Devan, your interest in Miss Bently should keep you far too busy to worry about me," she remarked coldly.

"Worrying about you, my sweet, has become rather a habit with me, I'm afraid," he grinned wickedly. "Anyway, since they're putting the place up for sale, this seems like a good time to look it over. I may be interested in buying it."

Steve had mentioned yesterday that the Marsh plantation had been left to a nephew, since the elderly couple had no children of their own. The new owner lived on his own plantation just outside of Nashville and, not being able to manage both plantations at the same time, he immediately decided to sell this one, sight unseen. The sale was being handled by a lawyer in Vicksburg, and Steve had heard that the price would be reasonable, since the new owner seemed anxious to get it off his hands. Some of the slaves had already been sold, but some had simply vanished after the uprising.

A small frown creased her forehead as she listened to this explanation. "Then I suppose that means you'll be leaving Belle Glen just as soon as your year is up."

"Probably; but if I do buy this place, it will take quite a while just to build another house, so it's quite possible that I might have to stay on at Belle Glen a little longer than I had originally intended. Why don't we ride around some, then you can give me your opinion of this place's possibilities?"

Jody started to refuse, but seeing the hopeful look in his eyes, her anger suddenly subsided.

"Very well, if you really would like me to."

Dave flashed her an appreciative grin and helped her to her feet. He had missed the girl's warm friendship and was eager to renew it.

As they rode over the spacious grounds, Jody slowly but plainly showed pleasure in discovering the unspeakable beauty which spread before them. Though she had visited the Marshes on various occasions in the past, she had never gone beyond the house, so that all of this was new to her. Dave would have been more appreciative of the land had he not been so distracted by Jody's nearness, his sudden awareness of her as a woman. It was, he real-

ized, quite a disturbing awareness and one which he was not ready to try to fathom.

Silently he studied every detail of her appearance, seeing in her a unique beauty which he had noticed occasionally, but never fully appreciated until now. True, the green velvet riding habit she wore complemented her figure as well as the greenness of her cat-like eyes. It was by far the most becoming outfit he had ever seen her wear, certainly more becoming than the riding breeches she had worn on their many previous rides. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully, sliding over the bodice which fitted tightly, provocatively, over her tip-tilted breasts down to the tiny waist which he could easily span with his hands.

The sun was setting in a blaze of fiery red as they reached the top of a picturesque bluff which overlooked the turbulent waters of the Mississippi and, stopping to rest, Dave helped Jody to dismount. She slid easily from the sidesaddle into his waiting arms and for a moment neither spoke, both aware of the strong pair of hands which lingered caressingly on her tiny waist. An unruly tendril of hair had escaped the green net which she wore, and Dave gently tucked it back into place, his lean brown fingers lightly tracing the contour of her face. He felt her tremble beneath his touch, saw her lips quivering expectantly, invitingly, touching off a spark of desire in him which surprised and puzzled him. This was not Cheryl, but Jody, and he chided himself for allowing her to affect him this way. She was still little more than a child, and he had no intention of robbing her of her innocence. He could not betray her in that way.

Abruptly he put her from him and walked over to the edge of the bluff. He heard her come up behind him, but his eyes remained riveted to the swirling waters below as he fought to regain his senses. Neither spoke as they stood side by side, silhouetted by the gloriously fading sunset, each wrapped in unbidden thoughts, until finally Dave turned to her.

"Tired?" he asked for want of something better to say.

"No—I was just thinking what a perfect spot this would be for a house," came the quiet answer.

Dave slowly nodded in agreement. "Yes, I believe it would. The veranda could face the river."

"Oh, yes! Then everyone could see how beautiful the house is when they pass by on the riverboats. The only problem is that there isn't a road leading up here, but you could have one made. That is, unless you want to live as a hermit," she laughed.

"That's a thought," Dave teased, falling in with her light mood. "On second thought, though, I believe I'll have a path cleared through that patch of woods that's between my place and yours—if and when I buy it, of course."

"But you will buy it, won't you, Dave?"

"If the terms are reasonable, yes. If I do, I'll have a path cleared through those woods first, then use the lumber along with the bricks from the old house to build mine. Where the Marshes' house stood, I'll plant cotton and cane," he added, his excitement growing to match hers.

Jody added a few more suggestions about the house and gardens which, she insisted, must have an abundance of roses, her favorite variety.

"Oh, Dave, it'll be the loveliest place in the world! Do buy it and start building as soon as possible."

"Seems to me like you're in a mighty big hurry to get me away from Belle Glen," he chuckled.

"It isn't that," she said, suddenly sobering. "It's just that—that I think you could be happy here."

The sun had almost completely diminished now, and as Jody walked back to where her mare was tethered, Dave experienced a stab of regret that the pleasant afternoon was almost over. He had known real peace and contentment with Jody standing beside him, encouraging him as though she shared his dreams. It was an odd thought, disturbing in that she would not be sharing his life here as well. He sensed that she knew this and that it somehow mattered to her. Lifting her into her saddle, he looked up at her with a tenderness that said more than the words he spoke.

"Thank you, Jody. As always, you've helped me more than you know."

Fighting to curb her own disturbed emotions, she was determined to hide the tears which now threatened to engulf her. She could not bear his pity should he discover how much she cared for him, and she was quite sure that he did not reciprocate her feelings. Anger and frustration returned.

"Oh, I'm sure Miss Benton could have helped you as much. Perhaps you'd better get her opinion as well!"

"Good Lord, Jody, what's come over you now? Can't you be civil anymore? I'd like for us to be friends, but you're making it damn difficult."

Jody's anger left as suddenly as it had come and she realized the unreasonableness of her statement.

"I—I'm sorry, Dave. I guess I'm still on edge a bit. You know I'll always be your friend, no matter what," she promised rather sadly as they turned to go.

Chapter VII

The forthcoming holiday promised to be a gay affair. Everyone at Belle Glen was bustling about the house, preparing for the Christmas festivities. Mammy Lou now spent most of her time in the kitchen, baking hams, turkeys and geese, along with a wide assortment of cakes and cookies. Since the holidays would undoubtedly bring many callers, Lettie insisted that each visitor be well fed and entertained. Southern hospitality demanded as much.

Christmas week was the time in the year when neighbors most enjoyed visiting one another, and the week of festivities usually ended with a ball on New Year's Eve. This year the ball was to be held at Belle Glen. Those who knew Lettie did not think it strange or even improper that she was breaking with conformity in order to sponsor this affair, even though it was quite soon after Jake's death. She was held in such high esteem that no one ever rebuked her actions whenever she broke with tradition, which was not very often. In addition, as one of the first to settle in the area, the Alans had become the backbone of Vickburg's small but elite society and were, therefore, beyond reproach.

Consequently, if Lettie Alan decided to give the New Year's Ball this year, no one was about to question her right to do so. And as she had anticipated, preparing for

these festivities was quickly dispersing the gloom which had hung heavily over Belle Glen ever since her brother's death.

Jody, Cheryl, Steve and Dave had already brought in a tall spruce tree along with some mistletoe and holly they had cut as well. Dave decided upon bringing in a yule log for the fire, for he insisted that no Christmas would be complete without one. It had been many years since he had enjoyed a real family Christmas, and he was secretly grateful to the Alans for inviting him to share theirs. For many years, Christmas had been rather lonely for him, usually spent alone.

Now, only two days before the eagerly awaited event, everyone quickly began decorating the house. Jody and Cheryl cheerfully strung popcorn and holly berries, playfully draping their colorful decorations over the prickly boughs of the tree while Steve and Dave added tiny candles to the furry limbs, boasting jokingly that their addition gave it just the right touch. Meanwhile, Lettie carefully arranged and rearranged holly and pine over the mantels, buffet and mirrors, and Uncle Thad hung the mistletoe from glittering chandeliers and every entrance.

When the work was finally completed, Steve looked at his pocket watch and exclaimed at the time. The morning had flown by faster than any of them had realized, nor did their gaiety cease once Steve had departed, but continued right on throughout the noon meal.

After they had eaten heartily, Lettie bundled the girls into the buggy and started for town. Icy rain threatened to turn into sleet before nightfall, and Dave thoughtfully suggested that it might be better if he, rather than Thad, drove them into town. Lettie appreciatively accepted his offer, which suited him fine since he, too, had some last-minute shopping to do.

At first, he had been somewhat hesitant to buy gifts for the family for fear of offending Lettie's sense of propriety, but his fear in overstepping his bounds quickly subsided once Lettie had invited him to share the family tree on Christmas morning. He was, in fact, looking forward to this little shopping spree, hoping to find an appropriate

gift for each member. After having given the matter considerable thought, he had already decided to get Miss Lettie a wool shawl, blue to match the color of her alert eyes. Cheryl had complained of not having a new fan for the New Year's Ball and wanted a white one to match the color of her new gown. Jody, however, presented a problem, for Dave could not imagine what she might like or need. A few months ago, this would not have presented a problem; then, a new bridle or riding crop would have suited her fine. But now that she had changed so much, he had not the slightest idea what she might like. Unlike Cheryl, she never complained nor asked for anything, not even for her birthday. He still felt a twinge of regret when he recalled that her birthday had gone by quite unobserved the week after Jake's death, though he imagined that Lettie, at least, had given her something. Nevertheless, he would like to make it up to her, so he was determined that her gift should be something especially nice. But what? He was still mulling over the problem long after they had started for town.

It turned out to be a pleasant trip, in spite of Cheryl's obvious resentment of Dave's accompanying them. She and Lettie bundled together under a wool robe in the back seat while Jody sat beside Dave in the front. She unconsciously snuggled closer to the warmth of his body as they jogged along over the bumpy road, singing carols at the top of their well-matched voices. But once they reached their destination, everyone separated, first agreeing to meet back at the carriage in three hours so that they could return home before nightfall.

Dave found the shawl easily, but had a little more difficulty in picking out a fan for Cheryl. After much debate, he finally chose a quite expensive one, one which he instinctively knew would be to Cheryl's liking. It was exquisitely delicate with white lace, sprinkled with seed pearls, spreading daintily over slender spokes of the purest ivory. He knew Cheryl would be impressed, though he had no delusion of her being overly grateful for the gift. Pride would prevent her from showing too much appreciation, not that it really mattered. Her fiery temper

and unwavering arrogance only made her all the more enticing as far as he was concerned. She was a constant challenge and, were she any different, he doubted seriously that she would seem half as interesting.

The last gift purchased was Jody's, which took more time and thought than all of his other purchases put together. He was still in a quandary as to what to give her when he suddenly remembered that he had never seen her wear any jewelry, then came to the swift conclusion that she probably did not own any. Believing she would enjoy wearing some small adornment on the night of the forthcoming ball, he quickly walked into a small shop which carried a wide assortment of jewelry. For some time his eyes scanned a variety of earrings, headbands, broaches and bracelets until, at last, his attention was caught by a dainty pendant which was attached to a narrow black velvet ribbon. A small red garnet rested in the center which was surrounded by a delicate scroll of tiny gold leaves and, when the shopkeeper casually mentioned that garnets were a symbol of loyalty, Dave knew he had found the right gift for her.

Particularly pleased with his selection, he walked briskly out of the shop and headed back to the carriage. A smile crossed his dark features as he imagined Jody's surprise and pleasure over the pendant and, for once, Christmas could not arrive soon enough for him. In fact, he could hardly wait!

As it turned out, it was the nicest Christmas Dave had ever had. With the exception of Cheryl, the Alans were careful not to leave him out of anything, as though they fully intended for him to feel like a real member of the family.

Everyone was pleased and surprised over the gifts he had so carefully selected for them, and even Cheryl momentarily dropped her coldness to thank him for the fan. But when she saw Jody's pendant, her animosity towards him quickly returned.

"It's a trifle gawdy for your taste, Jody, but then I suppose you'll have to wear it."

The remark was intended for Dave who was clearly in earshot and Jody sent her sister a withering look.

"It's the loveliest thing I've ever had, Cheryl, and I'll be more than proud to wear it." Turning to Dave, she smiled up at him, adding, "It's the nicest gift I've ever received. I'll always think of you whenever I wear it."

The sincerity with which she made this statement erased the frown from his face, nor did any other incident mar the otherwise perfect day. He had not really expected any gifts from the Alans and the ones he received came as a complete surprise. Cheryl, at her aunt's insistence, gave him a wool scarf, but deliberately ignored him when he tried to show his appreciation. Jody eagerly presented her gift, a handsomely carved pipe which she had undoubtedly selected herself. It was Lettie's gift, however, which came as the biggest surprise. The last item under the tree was a beautifully wrapped small box and, upon handing it to him, Lettie's eyes suddenly misted with tears. Opening the lid, Dave was for once in his life at a loss for words, for inside was Jake's gold pocket watch.

"I think my brother would have wanted you to have it, Dave. You sometimes remind me so much of him, when he was in his prime. I rather think that he pictured you as the son he had always wanted," Lettie stated, patting his hand affectionately.

It was quite an unusual admittance for her, considering her low opinion of him in the past. As Dave stared at the watch in his hand, he was overwhelmed with gratitude, for the first time feeling a genuine affection for the elderly lady. Clearing his throat, he huskily thanked her.

"I'll take good care of it, Miss Lettie, as well as try to live up to your expectations."

"I'm sure you will, young man." The simple sincerity of his words had pleased her, endearing him to her for all time. Quickly dabbing her moist eyes, she hurried towards the kitchen where Mammy Lou and Thad were awaiting their instructions for the day.

Both servants had received their gifts from the family, including Dave's, and were now happily ready to get on with their work. No one doubted that Mammy Lou would

put forth an extra effort to make this particular meal a scrumptious one.

That afternoon Steve and his mother arrived heavily laden with their Christmas presents for the Alans, so that gifts were once more exchanged. Ever since Steve's father had died, the Blakes had taken their Christmas meal with the Alans, for the two families had always been extremely close. Dave discovered that Steve's mother, Miss Bert, had a delicious sense of humor, and it was she who constantly stimulated the laughter which filled the large dining room as the meal progressed.

Of all the appetizing meals Mammy Lou had prepared since he had come to Belle Glen, Dave realized that this one surpassed them all. Never had he seen so much food and each dish had been prepared to perfection. The first course consisted of a clear chicken soup swimming with tiny egg noodles. Each soup plate was topped off by a boiled chicken claw which was a delicacy in itself. This was followed by a huge turkey, roasted to a deep golden brown, and a succulent smoked ham. The side dishes of cornbread dressing and giblet gravy, sweet-potato pie, tiny lady peas, turnip greens swimming in a rich pot liquor and a delectable cranberry sauce were worthy of any gourmet's praise. Hot fluffy biscuits and buttermilk cornbread accompanied the meal along with freshly churned butter and plum jelly.

It was a wonder that anyone had room for dessert, but no one could possibly pass up Mammy Lou's delicious fruit cake and parfait which was served with café au lait. Her efforts were rewarded by a profusion of compliments as she waddled back and forth from the kitchen to the dining room.

Jody, who seemed to be her former self again, teasingly remarked to Mammy Lou:

"I don't think you fixed quite enough for us to eat, Mammy! Why, everything was so good, I think I could have eaten twice as much!"

"Hmph! If'n you et all yo'd laks ter et, hits gwine ter tek a bigga man den Mis't Dave ter hep' you outta dat chair!"

Everyone except Jody laughed, but embarrassed, she only blushed and quickly ducked her head. After a few moments, she shyly glanced at Dave who was in the process of telling Steve about his decision to buy the Marsh plantation.

"Dave, that's wonderful! And if I know you, you'll have that place in the best shape it's ever been in," exclaimed Steve.

Cheryl, realizing that in a short time Dave probably would be quite the prosperous landowner, was unreasonably irritated. The very idea of their overseer becoming their closest neighbor was totally unacceptable to her.

"Oh, I don't know. Do you really think Mr. Devan has had enough experience to be able to run such a large plantation properly? I'm rather inclined to think that he might have bitten off more this time than he can chew," she drawled spitefully.

Before anyone could chastise her for her rudeness, Dave intervened.

"Now, don't you go worrying your pretty head about that, Miss Cheryl. I think I'll manage quite well, particularly as long as Miss Jody and Steve are nearby to steer me straight. I believe I once told you that I always get what I go after. Well, this happens to be the first step," he finished meaningfully.

"I'm afraid you have many disappointments ahead of you, Mr. Devan," she remarked sarcastically and would have said more but for the disapproving look she was receiving from Steve.

She let the matter drop, but silently swore that Dave Devan might get everything else he wanted, but he would never, *never* have her. She was determined to fight him with her last breath!

Riding home in their carriage, Miss Bert experienced a strange, foreboding feeling, one of impending tragedy. She had watched her son and Cheryl all evening and now was convinced that the situation between them was getting out of hand. Long ago, she had accurately assessed Cheryl's character, or lack of it, and knew that the girl was far too

self-centered and selfish to make any man a decent wife. Believing her to be incapable of making any man happy for long, she was concerned about Steve's feelings towards the girl. Did he love her, she wondered, or was he merely infatuated with her? She desperately hoped for the latter, for such a match would inevitably lead to more tragedy than anyone would suspect. But what could she do about it? Her reasoning told her the answer, an answer which she rejected at first, until she was forced to admit that she really had no other choice. Reluctantly she decided that the time had come for her to discuss an extremely unpleasant family matter with Steve, one which she had put off discussing with him for some time, now, but which could no longer be avoided.

"Son, I received a letter from Emily's mother yesterday, reminding us that Emily's eighteenth birthday will be next month."

"Oh? And how is she? Still as pretty as ever and twice as saucy?" he quipped, deliberately evading the issue which he could tell that his mother was determined to discuss—that of his marriage to Emily on her eighteenth birthday, an arrangement made long ago by both his parents and hers. At the time, he had been only a callow youth and had accepted this arrangement without questioning the wisdom of it. Now, as a man he did, particularly in view of his feelings for Cheryl. As much as he disliked having to disappoint his mother, not to mention Emily and her family, he realized that it was time to put an end to what had become a totally unacceptable situation. Carefully choosing his words, he broached the subject with as much tact as possible.

"Look, Mother, you know I don't want to hurt or disappoint you in any way. I know you and Pa always tried to do what was in my best interest and that you both thought Emily and I would someday make a good match, but—" He faltered, seeing the droop in her shoulders and despising himself for the anguish he was causing her.

"But you don't want to marry her; is that it, son?" His mother sighed, then straightened her shoulders. "I sup-

pose your feelings have changed because of Cheryl, haven't they?"

"They haven't changed, Mother, not really. I have the greatest admiration for Emily, but I just don't love her. I never have, not in that way, at least. How can I love someone that I've only rarely seen and hardly even know?"

"But don't you see, if you did give yourself the chance to know her, you might feel quite differently? Love, real love, that is, comes *after* marriage, once you really get to know someone. Whatever one might feel before marriage is usually nothing more than infatuation. How can you love someone until you really know her? And knowing a person, really knowing her, can only come after you've had the opportunity of living together, sharing the good and the bad, the ups and the downs. That's what marriage is all about, son."

Steve groaned and shook his head as though to clear his troubled mind. "But how can I possibly learn to love Emily when I already love someone else?"

"I suppose you mean Cheryl Alan," she sighed wearily.

"I guess it's rather obvious, isn't it?"

"Quite. At least, it's obvious that you're attracted to her; but as I said before, that can hardly be called love. Oh Steve, can't you see that Cheryl will never make you happy? She hasn't the capacity to give, only to take."

"Whatever her shortcomings, Mother, I want her. I'm asking you, begging you, to release me from my engagement to Emily."

She had expected as much, had suspected for some time, in fact, what was in her son's mind, but the blow was nonetheless devastating. A sharp pain shot through her chest as she steeled herself to do what she now realized should have been done long ago. To tell him the truth. A truth so terrifying, so horrible, that she had hoped and prayed she would never have to divulge it. Now she realized that she must. There was no other alternative.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but I can't do that. Your engagement to Emily must stand. You see, we never told you

why this arrangement was made, but now I realize that you should know."

"It doesn't matter why the arrangement was made, Mother. Don't you see that I can't go through with it? If you won't consider my feelings, at least consider Emily's. Dragging her into such a marriage would be terribly unfair."

"And I disagree," his mother replied abruptly. Hesitating for only a moment in which to carefully choose her words, she then continued. "You see, son, our family has been cursed with hereditary insanity." Seeing the horrified look on Steve's face, it was all she could do to continue. "It doesn't appear in every generation, but it always reappears eventually."

"You—you can't be serious!" he gasped. "There can't be anything like that in our family. There just can't be! You *must* be mistaken."

"But I'm not, son. Your father's great grandmother was the first we knew of, but later we found out that there had been others before her. She had a son and a daughter. The daughter was Emily's grandmother. She had three children; two of them died in childhood. The third was Emily's father."

She paused, hating to go on, but knowing that she must. From the expression on Steve's face, she knew that he was still unconvinced, still unmindful as to why he must marry Emily.

"Your father was also an only child and, because of this, he and Emily's father became as close as brothers, often forgetting that in actuality they were only cousins. Then, unexpectedly, the tragedy occurred again. When Emily was only a small child, her father began to have spells when he would behave irrationally; yet, afterwards, he never seemed to remember the abnormal things he had said and done. It was then that we began to suspect that your great-great-grandmother's affliction might be hereditary and, after investigating further into our family's background, we found this to be the case."

"But what has this to do with my breaking my engagement to Emily?" Steve asked bewilderedly.

"Surely you can see the risk you'd be subjecting Cheryl to if you married her, son. The worst, of course, might never happen, but then again it could. If you really love Cheryl, are you willing to take such a chance with her happiness?"

They had reached home now, and as Steve brought the carriage to a halt in front of the veranda, a tormented groan was torn from his throat and he lowered his head to his hands, hands which were visibly shaking.

"No, no—God knows I'd never hurt her like that." A painful silence enveloped them until he finally composed himself. "And what happened to Emily's father?" he asked tiredly.

"Shortly after we discovered that his illness was hereditary and were forced to recognize the change in his behavior for what it was, it seemed that his seizures became more frequent, as well as more violent. In his saner moments, he feared that someday he might harm his wife or Emily, and he often discussed this possibility with your father. It finally came to the point where he could not cope with it any more and he—he shot himself. To this day, Emily still believes that her father died in a hunting accident, which is what she was told at the time. I hope that it will never become necessary to tell her otherwise."

"But it was Emily's father, not mine, who was insane. Isn't it just possible that such a thing might never occur on our side of the family?"

"Perhaps, but it isn't very likely. You're forgetting that Emily's great-great-grandmother was also your own. While Emily's family were descendants of her daughter, your father's family were descendants of her other child, the son. Had we known about all of this before you and Emily were born, I doubt that either of you would be here now. That's why you were an only child. I would have liked to have borne other children, but under the circumstances, I dared not."

"You must have lived in hell all of these years," he commented softly, suddenly understanding her as he never had before and realizing, for the first time, how re-

markably strong she really was, despite her feeble appearance.

"I suppose so, though Emily's mother has suffered far more than I," she remarked thoughtfully as her mind wandered back through the years. Then, bringing herself back to the present, she added briskly, "But if this family is destined to live in hell, then it will have to be our own private hell. We must not be so selfish as to bring innocent people into our personal misery and force them to share it with us. Especially not the ones we love. You can see that, can't you?"

"Yes—yes, of course, I can," he murmured hoarsely, then asked, "When do you—do you want me to leave for Natchez? I assume that is where the marriage will take place."

"Under the circumstances," she replied, referring to his attachment to Cheryl, "I think the sooner your marriage takes place, the better it will be for all concerned."

"Then I'll leave day after tomorrow, if that's agreeable with you."

"I think I can be ready by then. I wouldn't think of missing my only child's wedding, you know," she smiled, squeezing his hand affectionately as he helped her to alight from the carriage.

Steve hugged her to him, not wanting her to see the torment he was experiencing. She had suffered too much already to be punished further by the knowledge of his own agony. But as she looked up at him, he saw her worried expression.

"And what of Cheryl, son? How—what will you tell her?"

"I don't know, Mother. I wish to God that I did," came his anguished reply.

"Perhaps—perhaps it would be best if you just sent her a note on the day of our departure."

"She would despise me for taking such a cowardly way out, but then I suppose she'll despise me anyway. She'll never understand why I'm marrying Emily, especially not after I had led her to believe that I was going to break the engagement. She'll hate me, but—perhaps that will be for

the best, since I can't explain the reason behind my marriage."

"She might hate you for a while, my dear, but she'll eventually get over her bitterness. In time, you may even be friends again, though in a different way."

He doubted it, but refrained from saying so as they slowly mounted the porch steps. It was just dawning on him that at any time during his life he, too, could be unexpectedly stricken with insanity, just as Emily's father had been. The thought was so horrible, so frightening, that he tried to push it from his mind; but his attempt was in vain, for he was already living in his own private hell.

Chapter VIII

Most of Vicksburg's elite were gathered at the Alans' to welcome the new year. The spacious ballroom quickly filled to capacity, becoming so overcrowded that it was almost an impossible feat to move, much less dance. This inconvenience failed to bother Dave, for he was not in a frivolous mood anyway.

Instead, he stood negligently beside Lettie's chair, only half-attentive to the conversation going on between her and two other matrons who were seated beside her, both eagerly filling her in on the latest tidbits of town gossip. That he was not in a particularly festive mood was evidenced by his somewhat stoic expression, except when his gaze occasionally traveled across the room and rested on Cheryl. On these repeated occasions it was as though he silently willed her to look in his direction, a gleam of sardonic amusement spreading over his rugged features each time their eyes met in silent confrontation.

He had deliberately avoided asking her for a dance, knowing well that such an obvious slight would undoubtedly rankle her, which it did. Always greedy for attention, Cheryl could not stand being ignored, nor was she accustomed to being snubbed. Though every other eligible male in the room had sought her out throughout the entire evening, Dave had not, nor did he intend to. He instinctively

knew that ignoring her was the surest way of gaining her attention.

Not that it really should have mattered whether or not he danced with her at all, for she was anything but neglected. As usual a score of admirers clustered around her, each obviously enthralled by her teasing manner as she repeatedly dimpled into provocative smiles or laughed brightly at some remark. A little too brightly, thought Dave dryly, considering her antics over the past week or, to be precise, ever since she had received Steve's note telling her of his forthcoming marriage to Emily. The note had been brief, apologetic, and totally devastating.

For days now, Cheryl had ranted and raved in her bedroom, upsetting the entire household with her childish behavior and refusing until tonight to even come downstairs for her meals. Recalling a few of the tantrums he had unwittingly overheard, her hysterical voice sometimes drifting down to the parlor much to Lettie's obvious chagrin, Dave was certain that the lighthearted gaiety she was now displaying was only a sham. He was also certain that her pride was damaged far more than her heart, though in Cheryl's case that in itself was tantamount to disaster!

He had not believed for a moment that she loved Steve, but he instinctively knew that she would never willingly relinquish any possession. And as far as Cheryl was concerned, Steve had been exclusively hers since childhood. She did not love him, but neither did she want anyone else to have him.

An amused smile played at the corners of his mouth as the thought occurred to him that, probably for the first time in her entire life, Cheryl Alan had been thwarted. It was Lettie who, turning her attention to Dave, suddenly brought him back to the present.

"For the life of me, I can't see why you're not dancing tonight, young man. There must be one young girl here that suits your fancy!"

"Later, perhaps," Dave smiled. "What I want most right now is a little fresh air and a good cheroot."

"If you wait much later, you'll have to wait until the

next ball. It's almost midnight now. On, go on with you!" she snapped good-naturedly.

Dave excused himself from the ladies and walked out on the veranda, but not before sighting Jody, who also was surrounded by a group of admiring young men. His gaze, in fact, had wandered in her direction several times during the evening, each time more and more appreciatively, for she was now quite changed from the gauche young girl of the past. She was far more composed, he realized, and quite beautiful. Unlike her sister, this girl would never look like a Dresden doll. She was far too vital, too warmly sensuous, for that type of fragile beauty, her looks being more gypsy than delicate even though she was small.

His mind continued to dwell on her even after he had finished his cigar, and he found himself recalling every detail of her appearance; from the dark red-velvet gown she wore, cut so low as to reveal the tantalizing swell of firm breasts which hinted of voluptuousness later, to the lacy white mittens on her tiny hands. Rather bemusedly he brought his train of thought back to the present.

Tiny snowflakes caught in his dark hair as a brisk winter breeze nipped at his face. Leaning on the porch railing, Dave appreciatively viewed the white stillness which stretched before him. Tall trees, only dimly silhouetted by pale moonlight, cast their dancing shadows on the new-fallen snow and, though somewhat chilled, the loveliness of the scene made him reluctant to return inside. Once again, his mind strayed back to Jody and he felt puzzled, his puzzlement swiftly changing to irritation once he realized that he could not get her out of his mind. So intense was his annoyance that he involuntarily jerked when a small hand gently and quite unexpectedly tapped his arm.

"Aren't you even going to ask me to dance tonight, Dave?" asked Jody mischievously.

"You've been so popular that I hardly dared to hope I would be given the chance!" he quipped. "Particularly since you once believed me to be such an old fogey!"

"Oh, Dave, that's not fair! If you're referring to the day we met, you know I was just teasing you."

"Were you? Hmmm—I was never quite sure, you know!"

Jody laughed, casting him a provocative glance from beneath her long sooty lashes, then suddenly her laughter ceased. As their eyes silently met and held, his arm slowly encircled her tiny waist and he pulled her to him. They waltzed in total silence for a few minutes and a bemused smile crossed his face as, looking down at her, he again marveled at her unique beauty.

"What are you thinking?" she asked softly.

"I was just realizing how much you've changed since—"

"Since the uprising," she quickly interceded, not wanting the moment to be spoiled by any reference to Jake's untimely death.

"Yes, you've grown up quite a bit since then."

"I thought you hadn't noticed," came the teasing reply.

"Oh, I've noticed, and I must say that the change is remarkable."

"You do approve, I hope," she bantered.

Dave suddenly sobered, the humor fading from his eyes as he seriously regarded her lovely up-turned face.

"I think you already know the answer to that," he murmured, noting mentally how gracefully she waltzed.

Jody studied him seriously for a moment, then shyly lowered her eyes to his broad shoulders. A small pulse beat rapidly in the hollow of her throat, just beneath the pendant he had given her. As her long curls brushed lightly over the hand on the small of her back, a disturbing sensation began mounting in his loins, and he wondered if she had any idea of the effect she was having on him. Probably not, for it even came as a surprise to him. Could a man possibly love two women at the same time?

The waltz ended abruptly with a loud burst of cheering from inside the house which signified the arrival of midnight.

"Happy New Year, Dave," murmured Jody, still clinging to him.

"In New Orleans there's a unique way of expressing that thought," came his husky reply as he tightened his arms around her. Pulling her to him, Dave lowered his head, his mouth covering hers gently at first until, feeling her warm response, passion blocked out all reasoning and he crushed her to him. He felt her tremble as his mouth parted her soft lips, heard her moan as his experienced hands explored the provocative curves of her tiptilted breasts. It was as though his urgency was matched by her own.

Unexpectedly, a woman's shrill laughter sounded from the doorway, startling them so that they instinctively sprang apart.

"Why, I do believe my little sister has finally found something more interesting than horses, gentlemen," Cheryl remarked cattily to her two escorts.

Jody flinched as though struck and attempted to move out of Dave's embrace, but even as his arms released her she felt the steel-like grip of his fingers on her wrist. Casually slipping his other arm around Jody's waist, his gaze raked coolly over Cheryl's taut body as an uncomfortable silence ensued.

Cheryl, undaunted, brazenly moved closer and lightly rested her hand on Dave's broad chest. Coyly, she lifted one delicate brow and gave him a provocative smile.

"I feel quite neglected, Mr. Devan," she pouted flirtatiously. "Though you've danced with Jody, you haven't even spoken to me all evening. You really should be ashamed of yourself, particularly since I saved this next dance just for you!"

"What a pity, Miss Alan. You see, your lovely sister has already promised this dance to me. Will you excuse us?"

Cheryl gasped as Dave turned and gallantly offered his arm to Jody, who was obviously stunned. Seeing Cheryl's venomous look of outrage, a derisive smile quirked the corner of his mouth as he led the younger girl back to the ballroom.

Quite perplexed, Jody looked questioningly at Dave as they began dancing. Her sister had been furious and with

good reason. He had been deliberately rude to Cheryl just now, and on top of that, he had told a bald lie, one which was hardly convincing to anyone. But why on earth had he done it? And, most of all, why on earth was he deliberately avoiding her? She waited for him to explain, offer some kind of explanation anyway, but when he did not, she was unable to conceal her curiosity any longer.

"Why, Dave? You know I hadn't promised this dance to you. Surely you'd rather dance with Cheryl than with me!"

"Not at all," he smiled gently, but seeing that she still remained unconvinced, his smile faded and he regarded her more seriously. "Look, Jody—I *never* do anything unless I really want to. Always remember that."

"And—and you really would rather dance with me than with Cheryl?" she whispered amazedly. "Really?"

"Really," Dave chuckled.

Nor did he give her cause to doubt this assertion as he devoted himself to her for the rest of the evening. Much to his own surprise, he discovered a reluctance to leave her side for a moment. It was as though he had witnessed a beautiful butterfly emerging from its cocoon; the transition was as enchanting as it was enticing. If only a short time ago Jody had seemed relatively unimportant to him, such definitely was not the case now. As never before, she was excitingly different tonight, and quite disturbing. Too damned disturbing to be so innocent, he decided rather cynically, and too damned trusting for her own good! Especially where he was concerned!

Later, as Dave sprawled across his bed, his thoughts kept returning to Jody. Too tired to take a bath, he had merely sponged off and wrapped a towel around his narrow waist. He was almost asleep when a sudden gust of cold air washed over him, rousing him to the extent that he sleepily raised himself to an elbow and glanced scowlingly towards the open front door.

The figure of a woman was silhouetted against the opening, her exquisite shape perfectly outlined by the transparency of her flimsy nightgown and wrapper. Dave

immediately jumped to the conclusion that it was Jody and that some disaster had occurred at the main house. Why else would she be coming to him so scantily clad at this ungodly hour, particularly on such a raw night? At that precise moment, his unspoken question was answered, as the moon briefly emerged from a cloud bank and illuminated the room. The woman was not Jody, but Cheryl!

"Do come in, Miss Alan," he invited mockingly, adding with a shiver, "but close the damn door! What in God's name are you trying to do—catch your death of pneumonia?"

Cheryl slammed the door shut and stalked over to where he lay, still in a half-reclined position. Without bothering to answer, she raised her hand and slapped him hard across the face.

"How dare you make a fool of me in front of my guests!" she gritted venomously.

Dave slowly rubbed his cheek, a sardonic grin spreading over his dark features as he eyed her with obvious amusement.

"I'm afraid you made a fool of yourself, my sweet," he retorted, his smile fading as he stood up and took hold of her shoulders. "But if you ever slap me again, I'll break your pretty neck!"

"I'm not afraid of you, Dave Devan!"

"Oh, I'm sure you're not—or you wouldn't be here in the first place." Releasing her, he walked over to the fireplace and threw an extra log onto the dying fire. "As a matter of interest, just why in the hell *are* you here? Surely not for the mere pleasure of slapping my face!" he chided, his bold eyes raking over her seductive body.

"That, and to make sure you understand exactly how much I loathe and despise you!"

A soft chuckle escaped his broad lips as he walked back to where she stood, glaring at him now with a defiance which was impossible to miss. A small pulse beat rapidly in the hollow of her throat and she instinctively took a step backwards just as Dave's large hands clamped down on her arms.

"So you loathe and despise me, do you? I think not, or you wouldn't be here in this flimsy thing," he remarked devilishly, adroitly undoing the sash which held her thin wrapper together.

Cheryl gasped and tried to break free of his grasp, a newborn fear dispersing her anger. As hard lips brushed lightly over her bare shoulder, she was only vaguely conscious of her wrapper slipping to the floor, and for a moment she stood still as though mesmerized by his gentle touch, the very nearness of him. She suddenly realized that she wanted him, had always wanted him, just as she instinctively knew he was quite aware of it. A feeling of shame engulfed her, quickly drowning out passion and causing her to renew her struggles more vigorously than ever.

"Let go of me! Let go of me or I swear I'll kill you!"

Dave grabbed the clenched fists which beat futilely against his broad chest and, forcing them behind her back, jerked her to him. His mouth came down on hers, savagely devouring the sweetness of her lips, demanding a response which she vainly fought to withhold. He sensed rather than saw her resistance weakening, felt her tense again as his free hand fondled, then extracted, a firm breast from its filmy confinement. As his tongue teased the hardened tip, he heard her groan, then felt the sharpness of her teeth as they clamped down on his ear. Without thinking, he muttered a curse and backhanded her so forcefully that she was knocked sprawling across the bed.

Faint from the blow and only semiconscious, Cheryl glanced up at him bewilderedly, her eyes widening with fright as she watched the towel drop from his lean hips. A slow flush appeared on her face as the extent of his masculinity was revealed, but though she tried to force her eyes away from his virility, she found that she could not. A small whimper escaped her lips as he moved over to the bed, but before she could move, he was on top of her, his weight pinning her down and rendering her helpless. Panting breathlessly, she clawed at his chest until he captured

her hands and secured them, one on either side of her thrashing head.

"Hold still, you little hellcat!"

"Never!" she gritted. "You'll never have me!"

"Like hell I won't!" he muttered, thrusting her thighs apart with his knee as his mouth clamped down on hers again.

Cheryl felt the hardness of him pressing against her thigh, but her scream was choked off with his savage kiss, his tongue probing and searching, evoking in her a response which she could not withhold. Even as she fought him, she felt his hand sliding smoothly down her taut body, his fingers finally coming to rest on the softness of her inner thigh. She shivered convulsively and tried to jackknife away from him, but to no avail. Though he, too, was breathing heavily now, she knew she was no match for him, just as she knew she could not hold him off much longer.

"Don't fight me, Cheryl," he muttered softly. "You want this just as much as I do, so why pretend otherwise."

"I don't," she moaned, "oh, damn you, I don't!"

"Don't you?" came the mocking reply as he continued to caress her thigh with a slow stroking motion.

"No! Oh, God, how I hate you!" she cried, writhing involuntarily against the tantalizing invasion of his probing fingers. "You're nothing but an animal!"

"Shut up and kiss me." Stilling further protests with his lips, he kissed her brutally, bruising her mouth even as he tasted the saltiness of her tears.

He would wait no more for what would be rightfully his anyway one day, for he was determined to have her as his wife, now more than ever. Jody had suddenly ceased to exist for him. It was Cheryl whom he wanted, whom he *had* to have, nor did he intend to wait any longer. Shoving an arm beneath her and encircling her tiny waist, Dave pulled her to him.

He entered her gently at first, but as she arched and he felt the warmth of her inner recesses, a blind passion consumed him and he thrust forward more forcibly. A cry of

pain, mingled with surprised pleasure, escaped her lips as her arms wrapped tightly around his neck and her movements instinctively began matching his own. He knew that she could no more deny him now than she could deny her own wanton lustfulness. He had won and the knowledge excited him all the more so that his movements rapidly increased, until a wild sob tore from her throat and suddenly they both were enveloped in a sea of ecstasy.

Afterwards, there was no need for words as Cheryl somberly donned her wrapper and slipped quietly out the door. He wanted to detain her, but knew better than to try. Having her tonight had been enough for the present, but there was still the small matter of winning her love. For though she had given in to him in a moment of passion, he was not fooled into thinking that she loved him; not yet, anyway. If anything, she hated him more than ever, but this realization only served to strengthen his determination; for nothing—no one—was going to deprive him of having her. Oddly enough, Jody had seemingly faded into oblivion—at least, for the time being.

Chapter IX

1834

By the end of February, whenever Dave was not occupied at Belle Glen, he was busy supervising the building of his new home. The land, now fully paid, had cost him almost every cent he had and the remainder of his depleted bankroll had been used for purchasing slaves. He had bought only the strongest blacks, including a big buck by the name of Lemme. Though Lemme was almost blind in one eye, Dave felt that his obvious strength would make up for that one deficiency. A thin scar slanting from the Negro's eye suggested that his visual loss possibly had been caused by a brutal beating which evidently had taken place quite recently. There was something inexplicable about this Negro which interested Dave and, feeling almost sorry for him, he had, in a moment of weakness, decided to buy him, sensing that in spite of Lemme's affliction, he would prove to be a reliable and useful slave. His judgment soon proved to be correct, for Lemme quickly became Dave's right-hand man and capably supervised the construction of his new home, Oakhaven, whenever he was unable to get away from Belle Glen. It seemed that Lemme almost sensed where the best timber on the plantation could be found and he was a natural leader among the other slaves, particularly the ones who had been there when Dave had bought the plantation.

The oldtimers who had once been owned by the Marshes took an immediate liking to him, almost as if they had always known and trusted the big fellow.

So all in all, Dave was extremely pleased with this particular black, for he soon proved to be trustworthy, eager to please, and entirely dependable. Although he was curious about Lemme's blind eye, he never asked him about it. The auctioneer had mentioned that Lemme had been caught as a runaway slave, but whose slave no one knew. Dave imagined that his partial blindness had been inflicted by an overbearing master and that was probably the reason for his running away in the first place. If such had been the cause, Dave did not really blame Lemme, nor was his trust in him affected by it.

Money, or the lack of it, had quickly become a problem, so that it had been necessary to make a loan at the bank in order to buy seed and necessary equipment. The land was good river-bottom soil, however, and there was little doubt that the first crop would not only pay off the loan, but would also provide him with a neat profit.

He had hoped that the house itself would be completed by early autumn, but that remained to be seen. At least the slave quarters had not been touched by the fire which had destroyed the Marshes' house, though the shoddy shotgun shacks were, indeed, in sad condition and in need of immediate repairs. For the time being, however, the slaves had some kind of shelter and that would have to suffice until the main house was finished.

Meanwhile, all of Dave's energies were divided between Belle Glen, Oakhaven, and the gambling tables in town. There were enormous expenses to be met, but luckily he had won almost enough to pay for the elaborate furnishings which had already been ordered from New Orleans, not to mention the ornate crystal chandeliers which were ordered from France.

He was determined that his home would be the most elaborate showplace up and down the Mississippi River. Nothing less than the best would do—a home Cheryl would be proud to live in.

He had not seen much of Jody for the past couple of

months. In fact, he had avoided her as much as possible, feeling somewhat guilty because of what had transpired between Cheryl and him after the New Year's Eve ball. He was quite sure that Jody knew nothing about what had happened that night in his cabin, but the feeling of guilt persisted whenever he saw her, so much so that he went out of his way to avoid her whenever possible.

On the other hand, Cheryl's behavior towards him since that night had been just about what he had anticipated. She was cold and aloof, treating him like a stranger whenever she was not ignoring him altogether. On a couple of occasions he had caught her in the act of looking at him in a peculiar way, almost wistfully, but as soon as their eyes met, she had quickly turned away. He knew she was still fighting to subdue the emotions he had aroused in her, still fighting him even though she must know by now that she had no hopes of winning. She could not hold him off forever. It was simply a matter of time.

It was March when that time finally arrived, though not quite in the manner which Dave had expected. Despite the brisk windiness, Lettie had suddenly taken a notion to pay a call on the Blakes, who had only recently returned from Natchez. Seeing that Jody was impatiently waiting in the carriage while her aunt gave some last-minute instructions to Mammy Lou, he would have walked by with only a brief acknowledgment had she not beckoned to him. With an inward groan, he sauntered over to her.

"Oh, Dave, I'm so glad I got to see you before we left. I wonder if you'd do me a favor?"

"Your wish is my command," he remarked with a mocking bow.

"I'm serious, Dave. You see, Aunt Lettie and I are going over to Roselawn to welcome Steve's new wife. Miss Bert is giving a small supper party tonight in her honor, so it's quite likely that we may be getting home late."

"Is Miss Cheryl not going with you?" Dave asked curiously.

"No, and that's what I wanted to discuss with you. I'm really worried about her. She hasn't been feeling well

lately, and she refuses to see Doc Blanks. Aunt Lettie is quite beside herself with worry."

"And what was it you wanted me to do, Jody? I'm sure if she won't let the good doctor examine her, she certainly won't let me!" he joked.

"Oh, please be serious! I'd just feel better if you'd keep an eye on her while we're gone. You see, she's had these dizzy spells lately, and sometimes she becomes violently ill. Aunt Lettie and I didn't think we should go today, but Cheryl insisted."

Patting her small hand, Dave smiled and said, "I'll watch her like a hawk." Then more seriously, "Don't worry—she'll be all right."

Turning to help Lettie into the carriage, Dave wished them both a pleasant time and turned to leave.

"Oh, and Mr. Devan—" Lettie began.

"I know, Miss Lettie. I'll watch after Miss Cheryl, so you needn't worry. Just have a good time."

Lettie smiled gratefully, obviously relieved, but as the carriage pulled away, a feeling of unease unexpectedly swept over Dave. Recalling what Jody had just said about Cheryl's health, a frown slowly creased his forehead as a vague idea began to formulate in the back of his mind.

March—just a little over two months since that night when Cheryl had come to his cabin. And for the past few days, even he had noticed how pale and wan Cheryl looked. At first he had thought she might still be sulking over Steve's marriage to Emily, but surely that would not be the cause of her dizzy spells and, if Jody were not exaggerating, violent spells of illness. And why had Cheryl refused to see the doctor? She had not objected to seeing him when she had been so upset at Christmas, or rather those few days after Christmas. Was it just possible that she was pregnant? But if this were true, surely she would have told him by now. Still, if she were not in such a condition, then what *was* causing her to be so sick? All of a sudden he felt a mounting concern for her. Luckily it would soon be suppertime, and Dave suddenly decided that, if Cheryl dined downstairs as usual, he was going to get to the bottom of the matter.

Awaking from her nap, Cheryl lazily rubbed her eyes and looked around the room. She noticed that dusk was already falling and was irritated that she had overslept. Quickly she jumped out of bed and walked over to the window. Looking out and seeing that the carriage was gone, she realized that Aunt Lettie and Jody must already have left for Roselawn. She would have liked to have gone, too—mostly out of curiosity. She had not seen Emily in years, and she wondered if the girl was pretty. With surprise, she suddenly realized that she was no longer jealous of Steve's wife. In fact, since that night in Dave's cabin, Steve had ceased to matter to her.

Then, remembering that she would have to dine alone with Dave tonight, a feeling of dread swept over her. Smelling the faint odors which floated upstairs from the dining room unsettled her stomach so that she sank weakly into a nearby chair.

"This will never do," she chided herself. "I've got to tell Dave tonight—there's no other way." Fear washed over her as she contemplated the possibilities. "But what if he laughs at me? What if he doesn't believe that the child I'm carrying is really his? What if he doesn't want to marry me now?"

Laying her head against the back of the chair, tears slowly trickled down her pale face. "And why should he want to marry me?" she thought dismally. "I've avoided him ever since that night we—we—oh, how can he possibly want me now? How could he want to marry someone he doesn't even respect?"

After a few moments of agony, Cheryl finally brushed away her tears and wearily got to her feet. Squaring her shoulders, she muttered defiantly, "Well, there's no time like the present to find out just how he does feel about me. Somehow I'll just have to *make* him want to marry me."

Walking over to her wardrobe, she grumpily picked over her gowns, finally selecting a pale pink muslin. After slipping it over her head, she walked over to the mirror and critically surveyed her appearance, realizing with dismay that even a generous application of rice powder

could not possibly hide the dark circles under her eyes. After careful consideration, she decided to let her long hair fall loosely around her shoulders, hoping that it would somehow soften her ravaged appearance. As she removed the combs which held her hair in place, she vividly remembered Dave's having done the same thing the night he made love to her. A tingling sensation passed over her as she recalled how he had looked at her, how he had touched those intimate parts of her body until she had been wild with wanting him. Though she might not like him, there was one fact from which she could not escape. She was hopelessly in love with him. But did he love her?

Realizing that she was pathetically pale, Cheryl sharply pinched her cheeks, then bit her lips, hoping to bring some color into them. She sighed disgustedly, seeing that all of her efforts were in vain. She looked ghastly! Positively horrible—thanks to Dave Devan!

"Men are such vile creatures with their animalistic passion," she decided peevishly before storming angrily out of the room and slamming the door behind her with a loud bang.

By the time Cheryl reached the bottom stair, she had worked herself into a frenzy of wrath. Her loss of weight, as well as her illness and dizzy spells, were all due to that hateful man! Had it not been for him, she would be at the Blake's party now, enjoying herself and being the center of attention. Instead, here she was worrying about *his* feelings towards her! If he did not want her—well, there were plenty of other men who certainly did! Besides, she did not want him to marry her out of pity. That would simply be too humiliating. No, she decided, it was best to keep the truth from Dave until after he had proposed—if he ever did. She was determined to see that he was provided with the opportunity to do so tonight. Time was running out. In seven short months her baby would be born. The thought sent another wave of nausea over her as she walked towards the parlor. Dave was waiting for her just as she had suspected.

"How very nice that you have decided to honor me

with your presence tonight!" he remarked derisively. "I had rather feared you might prefer to dine alone."

Cheryl tried to control her temper and, smiling at him sweetly, hesitantly laid her tiny hand on his extended arm. Silently they walked towards the dining room.

Seeing how pale she was, Dave decided not to goad her any further, particularly since she seemed to be making an effort to be pleasant. It was obvious that she was not in good health at the moment, a fact which was worrying him more and more.

Seated at the opposite end of the long table, he watched her closely throughout the meal, noting that she only toyed with her food and actually ate very little. A dark frown creased his forehead as an uncomfortable silence ensued, each waiting for the other to speak first, but neither wanting to make the first move.

Dave's intent stare caused Cheryl to become fidgety, then irritable. "Why doesn't he say something?" she thought angrily, "anything at all! Of all times, why must he now decide to keep silent?" Looking at him, it struck her that Dave already knew her predicament and was gloating over it. She suddenly felt utterly miserable as another wave of nausea swept over her. She had to get out of this horrible room; she somehow had to escape his mocking, knowing eyes. Abruptly she arose and, clutching the edge of the table, snapped angrily:

"I'm afraid I cannot enjoy my supper with you staring at me as if I were some kind of a—a—" Putting a hand to her mouth, Cheryl quickly turned and ran from the room. She had only reached the third step of the long winding staircase when a frightening wave of dizziness descended upon her. She frantically clutched at the banister, then blackness engulfed her just as she felt herself falling into a seemingless bottomless pit.

Dave had watched her departure with an amused grin, but when he heard her steps falter on the stairs, he quickly sprang from his chair. As he ran towards the hall door, he heard the horrifying thud seconds before he saw her tumble down the curving staircase. By the time he reached her, Cheryl was in an unconscious heap on the

floor, a trickle of blood oozing down the side of her face from a small cut on her forehead.

"Cheryl! My God—" he groaned, sweeping the limp form into his powerful arms and starting up the stairs with her. Fear shot through him, for he realized that if Cheryl were carrying his child, such a fall could easily cause her to miscarry.

Mammy Lou had also heard the commotion and was only a few steps behind Dave. Seeing Cheryl's lifeless body on the bed, the old darky began to wail hysterically.

"Oh, Law'd—is she daid, Mis't Dave? Is mah baby daid?" Falling to her knees, her enormous bulk now shaking visibly, she then wailed even louder.

It was evident that Mammy Lou was not going to be any help in her present state of mind, and after first assuring her that Cheryl was anything but dead, Dave hurried her out of the room. Dipping his handkerchief into the washbowl, he gently wiped the blood from her pale face.

He was seriously contemplating having the doctor sent for when Cheryl moaned softly, then slowly opened her eyes. For a few seconds, everything was rather blurred, but as her vision finally cleared, she saw the worried look on Dave's face. The look of anguish somehow touched her far more than any words of comfort he might have given, and as a surge of tenderness swept over her, tears scalded her eyes and trickled down her face.

Believing that she was crying because of pain, Dave suddenly became frantic.

"My God, what have I done to you!" he muttered hoarsely, pulling her to him so that her head was resting against his broad chest.

She felt the rapid beat of his heart beneath her cheek, heard his ragged breathing, then realized that he was actually trembling. Trembling because he thought she was hurt! Happiness unexpectedly flooded over her as she looked up at him.

"I'm not hurt, Dave. Truly I'm not," she whispered.

"Then why are you crying?" he asked abruptly, holding her at arms-length and examining her more closely.

"Because I think you really must care for me—at least,

a little, and I didn't think you possibly could after—after what happened between us in your cabin that night."

"You little fool—of course I care for you! And that's putting it rather mildly! I told you how I felt a long time ago."

"I know, but I didn't think you really meant it. I was afraid that when you found out about the—about everything, you—you wouldn't want me," she sobbed.

He knew now, knew that his suspicions about Cheryl's being pregnant were actually true. Tipping her head back, he gently kissed her.

"Dearest, do you think I'd let our child be brought into this world without a name? Why didn't you tell me sooner? Am I really such a brute?"

"Oh, Dave, I didn't want it to be like this. I want you to love me, not marry me out of a sense of duty."

"Duty! If you hadn't been so intent on trying to hate me, you'd have realized how I felt about you from the start. Don't you have any idea how much I want you? How much I love you?"

"And I love you, too, Dave. I didn't want to—I didn't even realize that I did until that night in your cabin. Then afterwards, I was so ashamed—"

"You need never be ashamed of anything you do with me, sweetheart. Not any more. We'll be married as soon as possible and, with luck, by September we'll be moving into our own new home."

The thought of having a home of her very own fired Cheryl's imagination and she excitedly asked:

"Will it be a very pretty house, Dave, and will it be as big as this one?"

"Quite pretty and every bit as big as this one," he laughed, pleased with her childish display of pleasure. More soberly he added: "I built it for you, my love, hoping that someday—"

Tears again filled her eyes as she searched his face and discovered that he was, indeed, telling her the truth. Shyly, she traced the outline of his firm mouth with her fingertips.

"You can be so kind when you try," she murmured,

then snuggled closer to him, content to be in the safety of his arms. "But are you quite sure that this is what you want? I mean, you won't resent being tied down by a family?"

"I'm quite, quite sure, my love," he whispered, then kissing her lightly on the forehead, he pulled her even closer to him.

A new feeling of contentment settled on him as he realized that, at last, all of his dreams were coming true. His own plantation, Cheryl, and above all—a child. The first of his descendants! Fate had been kind, or so it seemed.

Chapter X

The announcement of Cheryl and Dave's forthcoming marriage, particularly the suddenness of it, came as quite a shock to the members of Vicksburg's small, straight-laced society. Such a thing was simply not heard of—Lettie Alan or no Lettie Alan! The Alans were deliberately defying every social standard! What could they possibly be thinking in allowing Cheryl to make such a rash decision? In the first place, a young lady with Cheryl's good breeding, background and affluence simply did not marry an overseer. It just wasn't done! And in the second place, a lady certainly did not announce her engagement one month, then marry her intended in the next. What did the Alans really know about this upstart, Dave Devan? Positively nothing! Other than that he was a gambler and a rake, admittedly good-looking, but still a rake. Of course, he had managed to buy the plantation next to the Alans', but this fact failed to pacify the Alans' friends. It still remained to be seen if he could manage it properly, which one and all doubted. So buzzed the narrow-minded acquaintances of the Alans. They were shocked, they were outraged, but they were also helpless to do anything about the match other than maliciously wag their tongues, which for the next month they did untiringly.

The wedding had been set for the first week in April,

which set all of Belle Glen in an uproar. Lettie had wanted to postpone the date until at least September, but Cheryl and Dave were adamant, so much so that Lettie began to suspect that there might be more behind the hasty wedding plans than mere love. The thought was upsetting, but Lettie wisely did not question them, nor did she make any further attempt to delay the wedding date.

Since there was not enough time for her to order material for Cheryl's wedding gown, Lettie unpacked the gown Maria had worn when she and Jake had been married many years before. Age had turned the once-white satin to a rich creamy color, but outside of that, the gown had been well preserved. Replacing the lace on the bodice and refitting it to Cheryl's smaller frame were the only alterations.

Dave had hoped to take Cheryl on a trip to New York for their honeymoon so that she could pick out some furniture for their new home. When he realized, however, that she was still in a somewhat weakened condition, he decided to forego the trip. Naturally, Cheryl had been disappointed, pouting and crying and finally exclaiming that her wedding was not going to seem like a wedding at all. Dave capitulated to an extent and promised her that as soon as the baby was born they would have their belated honeymoon. She was partially mollified, though not to the point that she was ready to admit defeat.

Jody, by sheer determination, superbly hid the shock and hurt she was experiencing, for though her heart was not in it, she somehow managed to wear a bright smile and tried to be as helpful as possible in assisting with the wedding preparations. No one suspected how she really felt; no one except Lettie, who sympathized wholeheartedly with her younger niece. At night, though, Jody's pent-up tears found release in the quiet privacy of her own room.

She would never understand why Dave's attitude towards her had changed since the night of the ball. He had certainly not been indifferent to her then, nor had his kiss been one of mere friendliness. The fact remained, however, that ever since that night he had all but ignored

her. Had he lost interest because she had submitted to his lovemaking too easily? she wondered.

As for Dave, he at least was temporarily happier than he had ever been in his entire life. And it was obvious that he worshiped the very ground Cheryl walked on. Only when he was around Jody did his newfound happiness fade somewhat, giving way to a deep-rooted feeling of guilt. Although he tried to treat her as a sister, joking with her and occasionally tweaking her ear, it was no good. He could not completely forget how she had felt in his arms on that one occasion, the sweetness of her lips as she had responded to his kiss, and the memory agitated him whenever she was near. He felt uncomfortable in her presence, so he avoided her whenever possible.

Jody and Steve were to participate in the ceremony as maid of honor and best man, and since Doc Blanks was the closest thing to a father Cheryl had, he was to usher her down the staircase and into the parlor where the ceremony was to be held. She had always loved the jovial little doctor, though she had little use for his addlebrained wife, Mattie, who was often referred to as the town's biggest gossip.

As for Mattie, when she had first heard of the announcement, she had been genuinely shocked. Her curiosity quickly overcame her shock, however, and she was one of the first to trot over to Belle Glen and offer her help—as well as her advice. She was more than a little anxious to find out if there were more to tell than the Alans were disclosing and, therefore, constantly asked very prying questions during her frequent visits. Unable to sift out any gossip from Lettie, she always departed for home thoroughly discouraged and irritated. There just *had* to be some reason for such a short engagement. Could Cheryl possibly be pregnant? she wondered after each visit.

Doc Blanks knew very well what his wife was up to and finally told her in no uncertain terms to "mind her own damn business." This had caused a family spat which had put them on a nonspeaking basis for nearly a week. It was the most pleasant week Doc had experienced in many

years. Seven whole days of blissful silence which he had thoroughly enjoyed!

Steve also had been surprised by the suddenness of the wedding announcement. He knew that Dave would make Cheryl a good husband, but try as he might, he could not rid himself of a small surge of jealousy whenever he thought of Cheryl's being married to his best friend. Had it not been for the unexpected hand fate had dealt him, she would have been his. He knew that in a way she would always seem his, no matter whom she married.

He sometimes had to remind himself that he was, indeed, married to Emily and that he was very fortunate to have such a lovely wife. She had the sweetest disposition of anyone he had ever known and, though she seemed quite scatterbrained at times, she was really very charming. It was unfortunate that her one goal in life was to give him a large family. He could not bring himself to enlighten her as to the truth, to tell her why it was not feasible for them to have even one child, much less a large family. How could he possibly tell such a gentle creature that any child she bore him might someday develop into an abnormal human being, one totally incapable of sane reasoning? He could not bear to hurt her like that, and there simply was no painless way to tell her the truth. With luck, she might never find out, for he fully intended to take every precaution to ensure that she never conceived. This, however, was not going to be an easy task, for Emily was a very affectionate person and always receptive to his passionate moods. Nevertheless he was determined to try; then, if it were God's will that they have a child—well, he would just have to cross that bridge when he came to it.

It was nearly April when Lettie found the opportunity to speak to Dave in private. The girls had gone to town that afternoon to shop for accessories to enhance Cheryl's going-away gown, since there was, after all, to be a honeymoon. Cheryl, after using every method of persuasion, had eventually convinced Dave that she was well enough to take a short trip, at least as far as New Orleans. All in

all, he was relieved that they would be leaving Belle Glen shortly after the wedding ceremony instead of spending that first night under the same roof with Jody. At best, such a situation would have been damned awkward.

Lettie was sitting on the veranda crocheting a dresser piece for Cheryl's hope chest when Dave rode up that afternoon. He had been supervising the work at Oakhaven and it was obvious that he was tired, dead tired. Running two plantations at the same time was not an easy job, particularly since he stubbornly refused to accept help from Jody. Though Lettie shrewdly guessed the reasoning behind his stubbornness, she felt he was allowing his emotions to override his usual good judgment. Once he and Cheryl moved to Oakhaven, all of his time would be required to properly run his own plantation, so it was obvious that Belle Glen would have to be managed by someone else, either another overseer or Jody.

Lettie would have liked to persuade the young couple to stay on at Belle Glen and combine the two plantations into one, thus making Jody and Dave equal partners. The main house would have been big enough for two families to reside in, but considering the way things were between Dave and Jody, she immediately realized that such an arrangement was out of the question.

With a troubled sigh, Lettie motioned for Dave to be seated, then ordered Mammy Lou to bring him a mint julep.

"I'm glad we're finally going to have an opportunity to talk, Dave. You've been so busy lately I've hardly seen you."

"I know, but I'm trying as hard as I can to get the house finished by fall. I just wish it could be finished in time for us to move in after the wedding," he sighed wearily. "I hate to impose on you."

"Nonsense! You and Cheryl will always have a place here, so your staying on for a few more months will hardly be an imposition." She hesitated, wondering how to approach the subject which she felt she must discuss with him. Then, true to form, she decided upon complete frankness.

"Dave, if Jake were alive today, I think he'd be very happy that you are going to be a part of our family. I rather believe he had hoped that you might be, someday. And if he *were* here, I think he would feel that you have a right to know all of the circumstances before you—before you marry Cheryl."

Dave frowned, a perplexed look crossing his handsome face as she briefly paused.

"I'm afraid I don't understand you, Miss Lettie."

"No, no, of course you don't. You see, Cheryl was not Jake's real daughter. In fact, she is not an Alan in any way, except that Jake adopted her when his own little girl died at birth."

Dave's expression registered his surprise, but he quickly recovered. "Does Cheryl know?" he asked bluntly.

"No, and she mustn't. To someone like Jody, it wouldn't make a particle of difference, but Cheryl—"

"You're right, of course. She has so much pride, it would hurt her deeply."

"Exactly. You see, even Maria, Jake's wife, never knew that Cheryl was not her own child. Only Jake, myself and a couple of the servants knew about the swap. The birthing had been difficult for Maria. She was always such a delicate woman and the doctor had misgivings about her condition from the start. We were all afraid that in her weakened condition, learning about the loss of her baby would be too much for her. At that point we actually feared for her life."

"I can imagine," Dave murmured. A hard glint came to his eyes as he saw the anxious look she gave him. "Why are you telling me this, Miss Lettie? Did you honestly believe for one moment that it would make any difference to me who Cheryl's real parents were?"

"No, but you do have the right to know who you are marrying, Dave. It shouldn't make any difference to you, but it would to some men, you know." Smiling gratefully, she paused briefly, then continued. "There was a family of poor dirt farmers who lived on the place. Jake had taken them in out of pity and was letting them farm the river-bottom land. There were quite a few children in the

family—too many. The oldest girl had gotten into an embarrassing situation. Her baby was born just a few days before Maria's.

"And this woman's baby was Cheryl," Dave finished.

"Precisely. They were more than glad to get rid of another mouth to feed, and I somehow can't believe that they've ever given her another thought. Afterwards, Jake paid them a very generous amount and sent them on their way. He was afraid that someone might hear or perhaps realize the truth if they stayed on."

"I would have never suspected it. Jake always seemed so fond of Cheryl."

"He was," Lettie interrupted. "Never doubt that for a minute. He worshiped Cheryl and, oddly enough, she did seem to favor our side of the family. He always felt grateful to the child and that's why he spoiled her so. He was convinced that Cheryl's coming here to live actually saved Maria's life, which was probably true."

"And Jody, what of her?"

"It's odd that only two years later, Maria died giving birth to Jody," she replied musingly. "It was such a tragedy. You see, Maria wasn't supposed to have any more children after she lost the first baby. Doc Blanks strongly advised against it. At first, Jake tried to insist on separate bedrooms, but Maria wouldn't hear of it. They were so much in love and—well, it was just one of those things, I suppose." Lettie sighed.

"Then Doc Blanks knows about Cheryl," stated Dave.

"Yes, bless his heart. He has kept our secret all these years, not even telling Mattie about it. I trust you will keep it as well."

"You need never worry about that. I would never intentionally hurt Cheryl, not if I could help it. And quite frankly, I couldn't care less whose daughter she is. You must have realized by now that my own background leaves much to be desired," he commented wryly.

"I had rather thought as much," came the brisk reply as Lettie rose to leave.

It was not meant to be an unkind remark, but merely a statement of fact which, now in the open, seemed to bind

them in mutual understanding. Lettie might never accept him on an equal footing, but there was no denying that she now trusted and respected him.

As for Cheryl, he would guard Miss Lettie's secret well, for he was determined that her illegitimacy would never cause her to suffer as he had suffered because of his own ignominious birth. Their children would have a respectable name, along with an enviable place in Vicksburg's society. He would, he swore, make damned sure of it.

Though not an elaborate ceremony, the wedding was quite lovely, and was held in the front parlor with only family and close friends present. Luanne Alan, a cousin from Natchez, was one of the guests Jody most welcomed. The two girls had been close since childhood, and Jody adored Luanne's mother, Anne. Anne Alan was a fine woman, loved and respected by all who knew her. Her marriage had been one of convenience, her family's convenience. Although she and John Alan had never been particularly close, Anne had made the best of a bad situation, never complaining.

Luanne was the same age as Jody, but there the similarity ended. Unlike Jody, Luanne was shy and reserved, yet, this shyness seemed to draw everyone closer to her. It was this same reserve, this seemingly quiet understanding, which now bolstered Jody's courage so that she was able to get through the wedding ceremony with a smile, even though it was a forced one.

Cheryl was a vision of loveliness as she walked serenely down the spiral staircase, and Dave looked at her throughout the entire ceremony with such obvious tenderness that even Lettie became misty-eyed.

Afterwards, the reception was held in the spacious dining room where an elaborate buffet was laid out which would have delighted any gourmet. Wine and punch flowed freely, so that toasts were repeatedly made to the bride and groom.

It was much later when Jody and Luanne accompanied Cheryl upstairs to help her get dressed for the trip. Cheryl was obviously nervous at first, but relaxed as Jody, forc-

ing a gay attitude she was far from feeling, exclaimed over her new going-away dress and reminded her of several items she had forgotten to pack. A scuffle ensued as both girls searched frantically for the forgotten items until, at last, everything was finally packed securely in Cheryl's bulging valise.

Had Jody looked at Luanne just then, she would have seen the sympathy in her cousin's soft eyes, for the gentle girl had immediately seen through Jody's little pretense. Luckily Jody was too busy with Cheryl to look at her cousin, who was seated nearby on the windowseat. Sympathy, even Luanne's, was the one thing she could not have endured at that moment.

Mammy Lou bustled into the room to see if the last valise was ready, then shortly ordered Uncle Thad to tote it downstairs. Too choked up to speak, she fiercely embraced Cheryl for a moment, then quickly waddled out of the room.

Finally Cheryl was actually ready to leave and, after warmly kissing her sister goodbye, then briefly hugging Luanne, she swept out of the room. She hesitated for a moment before descending the spiral staircase. After all, this was undoubtedly the most important entrance she had ever made—the beginning of a new life!

Jody and Luanne stood by the upstairs window and watched the departing carriage until it had disappeared from view. Jody had successfully held back her tears throughout the entire day, but now they threatened to overflow as a feeling of total despair swept over her.

Sensing her cousin's distress, Luanne wisely left the room, knowing that there would be ample opportunity to discuss the situation later. If she had her way, Jody soon would be going to Europe with her and her mother. They planned to leave in two weeks for an extended time abroad and Luanne felt that a trip was exactly what Jody needed at the moment. Not only time but distance was obviously needed to help her overcome her feelings for her sister's husband. But overcome them she must, for her own sake more than for Cheryl's.

Chapter XI

"Miss Cheryl, dey's uh w'ite woman downstairs ter see you. Ah tole her you wuz habin yo' breakfus', but she sez she jes' cain't waits. She luks lak jes' plain w'ite trash if'n you asks me! De laks ob her ought not be 'lowed thru de front do'!" Mammy Lou grumbled, plainly upset by the stranger's visit.

Cheryl wiped her mouth and calmly folded her napkin. Pushing her chair back from the table, she asked, "Who is she, Mammy Lou, and what does she want?" She had not been feeling well lately, certainly not well enough to entertain guests at this early hour.

"Ah don' knows whut she wants, Miss Cheryl, but she ain't gots no biz'ness in dis heah house, de laks ob her!"

"Why Mammy Lou, I've never seen you so upset over a caller. Do you know this lady?"

Realizing that she had almost given herself away, Mammy Lou shook her large turbaned head in denial, then guiltily shuffled her feet.

"Naw'm, ah sees lots ob w'ite folks, Miss Cheryl," she muttered evasively. "Ah sho' cain't be spected ter 'member all ob 'em," she added as she waddled indignantly out of the room.

Cheryl tightened her wrapper around her swollen middle and started for the door, pausing only a moment

to glance disgustedly at her distorted reflection in the floor-length mirror. She briefly wondered how Dave could show such devotion to her when she looked so damnably horrible. Nothing irritated her more than when someone commented on how well she looked or, even worse, told her that she was looking better than ever. Dave had been amused at her reaction when Mattie Blanks unthinkingly stated that Cheryl's condition was so becoming to her, she certainly shouldn't mind some of the inconveniences it caused. Later that night and in the confines of their bedroom, Cheryl angrily declared that either she must have looked like hell before or else Mattie Blanks was as blind as she was stupid!

To Cheryl, at least, expectant motherhood was anything but becoming and on this particular morning she was feeling positively wretched because of it. A frown puckered her brow as, entering the front parlor, she immediately saw the woman Mammy Lou considered to be an intruder.

Dowdy and unkempt, she was probably in her late thirties or early forties, judging from her faded blond hair and dumpy figure. She was studying Cheryl's portrait over the fireplace, and though her back was to the door, Cheryl imagined that her face would undoubtedly match her appearance and immediately understood Mammy Lou's reluctance to admit her into the house. She was obviously white trash. Clearing her throat to gain the stranger's attention, she entered the room.

"I believe you wanted to see me, Mrs.—" Cheryl paused, waiting for the visitor to turn and introduce herself.

Her caller jumped with surprise at the unexpected sound of Cheryl's voice, then quickly turned.

"Why yes, I did, dearie. And it's Miss, not Mrs. I'm Beatrice Brown, but most folks just call me Bea for short. Maybe you heard of me?" she added hopefully.

If Cheryl had delivered the first surprise, the stranger unknowingly delivered the second, for Cheryl immediately noticed the striking resemblance between herself and the newcomer. With disgust she silently noted that had the

woman been more finely dressed and a lot younger, they might have passed for sisters. An uneasiness overcame her as she shortly replied:

"No—no, I don't believe I have. What is it you want?"

"Well, I guess I can't blame 'em too much for not telling you about me when you wuz a baby, but it sure looks like someone should have told you by now. You see, dearie, I happen to be your mother!" she retorted, then took several quick steps towards Cheryl, her fat arms outstretched to encompass her.

Cheryl's horrified expression stopped Bea cold in her tracks. The look of revulsion in her daughter's eyes was too unmistakable to miss.

"You must be mad! How dare you! My mother died years ago when my younger sister was born. You must have me confused with someone else!"

Angered by her daughter's haughtiness, Bea raised her voice defiantly. "If anyone's confused, it ain't me, Miss Priss. You're my daughter all right, and if you don't believe me, just ask your old man. Or even better, just look in that mirror over there. I suppose the likes of me ain't good enough for the likes of you, but I sure as hell was good enough to give your old man a baby when his died at birth. Why, he even paid me—at least, he paid my pa enough so's we could pack up and move out of town. Just get the old man in here and he'll recognize me soon enough, I reckon."

Cheryl went over to the sofa and shakily sat down. It was as if she were experiencing a nightmare, only she knew that she was not. This was real, terrifyingly real! Reluctantly she looked up at the woman who brazenly stood before her, an ugly sneer now appearing on her hardened features.

"My father—Mr. Alan died last year."

Seeing how shaken the girl was, Bea momentarily pitied her. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. He was a fine man. Better than most, I reckon. He sure loved the missis. That's why he wanted you, so's the missis wouldn't ever know about her own baby dying. If you don't believe I'm your

ma, how else would I know about the little mole on the upper part of your right leg. It's still there, ain't it?"

Cheryl blanched, for this final statement confirmed that the woman was telling the truth. Feeling sick and more than a little anxious to get rid of the unwanted visitor, she unsteadily got to her feet.

"What is it that you want of me? I assume you do want something."

Sensing how vulnerable the girl was, Bea seized upon the opportunity. "Why, sweetie, most daughters would enjoy having their mother live near them, if not actually with them. As a matter of fact, since I'm stone-broke and there ain't no place else I can go, I thought maybe you'd be willing for me to come live here, at least for a spell," she suggested slyly.

"Surely you realize that is impossible. We live in two different worlds, and you obviously would never be able to fit into mine."

"Ain't we the fine one," Bea sneered maliciously. "Too good for the likes of your own mother, huh? Well, Miss High-an'-Mighty, if you want to get rid of me, you're going to have to make it worth my while to go."

"So it's money you want. I rather imagined as much," Cheryl retorted bitingly, then walked over to the secretary and sat down.

Bea did not deny this, but smiled as Cheryl made out a check for a thousand dollars. The smile slowly faded as the girl pulled out another sheet of paper and began writing again.

"This, my *dear* mother, is to ensure my never seeing or hearing from you again. You may have this check when you sign it," she stated coldly, handing Bea the sheet of paper to read.

To whom it may concern. On this day, August 1, 1834, I have paid Miss Beatrice Brown the sum of one thousand dollars for certain information pertaining to my own personal self. Should she contact me hereafter or mention my name to any person, for any reason, she agrees to relinquish the said one thou-

sand dollars and/or be put in jail for forfeit of agreement.

Bea sullenly signed the paper, then greedily snatched up the check. She had hoped that Cheryl might be sentimental enough to take care of her for the rest of her life, but wisely realized that a thousand dollars was better than nothing. It was probably better this way, she quickly decided, since she sure would hate to have to live like these snobs, comfort or no comfort.

Seeing that nothing else could be gained by remaining longer, Bea started to leave, but paused at the door.

"You may not believe this, but I didn't come just for the money. I really did want to see you and find out what you wuz like. I—I wish things could've been different for us. I mean—I wish I could've been a fit mother, so I could've kept you."

Then, taking one last look at her daughter, Bea turned and walked out of the house. Long after she had gone, however, her face lingered in Cheryl's tortured mind.

Afraid to mention the discovery of her real identity to Dave, much less her mother's untimely visit, Cheryl became irritable and nervous. She realized, of course, that the note Bea had signed was a very thin shield of protection and, therefore, began living in fear that her mother would not keep her word. The strain she was living under soon took its toll on her, both physically and mentally.

Cheryl had told Dave that she had made out a check to be donated to a very worthy cause, and never doubting her word, he did not connect the check to his wife's increasingly bad disposition. At first he was patient, but then he, too, became irritable.

One night before retiring, things finally came to a head. Believing that Cheryl was beginning to regret their marriage, if indeed she had ever been glad of it, his temper snapped. Hot words of anger flew from both sides and ended with Dave's calling Cheryl a no-good little bitch. The remark hit home, far more than Dave had ever imagined it would.

"You—you filthy-minded creature," whispered Cheryl vehemently. "How I loathe and despise you!"

"Possibly so, my dear," Dave chuckled sarcastically. "In fact, I'm quite sure you'd never have married so beneath your class had it not been for the—shall we say circumstances. It's a shame that Steve stands on such high principles, isn't it? Had he not, you might be carrying his child now, instead of mine, and possibly he would have married you, Emily or no Emily."

Cheryl, who had been standing by the fireplace a few feet from him, angrily grabbed up the poker which was inches from her hand and, raising it above her head, hysterically rushed towards him.

Dave stepped aside just as the blow fell. Catching Cheryl roughly by the arm, he twisted the poker from her hand. He was never sure what happened next, whether Cheryl merely stumbled or if he actually pushed her. The only thing he remembered later was seeing her fall against the marble-top table and crumble to the floor. On that sultry August night, Cheryl's baby was stillborn.

Months later, she bitterly blamed him, viciously enjoying reminding him of her miscarriage whenever the chance arose. Aside from those occasions, she showed no interest in him whatsoever, nor would she let him come near her.

As soon as she was well enough, Cheryl moved into her old room down the hall. Dave let her go without argument, knowing anything he might have said would have fallen on deaf ears. He blamed himself for their child's death with every breath he took, mourning the loss of the infant far more than the loss of his wife.

On a windy November night more than a year later, death claimed still another life at Belle Glen—Aunt Lettie. No one was certain just how old she was, but everyone assumed that she was well into her seventies. Nevertheless, it was an unexpected shock for everyone when she passed away in her sleep, for she had hardly been sick a day in her life.

Dave was perhaps the one who missed her the most.

Having admired and respected her judgment, he had often gone to her for advice on matters concerning Belle Glen, and, sometimes, even Cheryl. They had frequently stayed up until the wee hours of morning, enjoying a game of chess or parlor cards. And after Cheryl's miscarriage, Lettie had seemed to be his only friend, since Jody was still in Europe. Although he had never discussed the strain between his wife and himself, he sensed that Lettie somehow had understood. Now there was no one he could turn to.

After a while he began to resume his card games in town and, after having been denied his husbandly rights, finally began staying away from Belle Glen for days at a time. Subconsciously he was hoping that his marked absences would bring Cheryl to her senses, or at least make her realize that she was gradually losing him. But she was either too vain or too self-absorbed to grasp the situation, or she simply no longer cared, for she made no move towards reconciliation.

As time passed, Dave began to think more and more of Jody. She had been abroad with her cousin for nearly two years now, and he found himself wishing more and more that she would come home. For no explicable reason, he felt that her return would restore the happy mood that used to be a living part of Belle Glen. Often he sat by the fire, smoking the pipe Jody had given him and reminiscing over the times they had shared together while she had patiently taught him how to run the plantation.

There were times when he inadvertently found himself wondering if she had, perhaps, fallen in love with some young man in Europe, and the thought of this possibility always caused a strange misery to steal into his heart. But why should she not? he repeatedly reasoned, for he was, after all, still married to Cheryl, even though it was now in name only. Jody, he further reasoned, was certainly entitled to a life of her own. It would be selfish of him to hope otherwise. But it was when he began to fear that she would never return home that he experienced real anguish. Only then did he realize how deeply he missed her.

PART II

1836

Chapter XII

Dave stood by the huge fireplace in the parlor, warming his hands and listening to the howling wind that broke the silence of the night. The dim firelight, along with the tree branches brushing against the windows, gave the high-ceiling room an eerie atmosphere, which only deepened Dave's feeling of loneliness. He had endured the usual unpleasant supper with Cheryl and, later, she had retired to her bedroom with a decanter of peach brandy, a newly acquired habit that was beginning to cause Dave considerable concern. Cheryl still blamed him for the loss of their child, so that no matter what he did she reproached him, even though he was trying to be more considerate of her. Realizing that whatever brief happiness they had once shared could never be recaptured, he still entertained some small hope of narrowing the chasm between them and restoring compatibility, if not passion. There seemed to be no other solution, since divorce was considered to be so scandalous that it was altogether out of the question.

There was, however, one thing for which he could be thankful. Upon learning of her aunt's death, Jody had finally agreed to come home. Remembering that she could arrive any day now, Dave smiled and squared his broad shoulders. He was more than a little eager for her return;

then he would be able to see at least one friendly face at the end of the day, be able to confide occasionally in someone who shared his interest in Belle Glen. Jody, he knew, would share that interest, for Belle Glen had always been, and would always be, her prime concern. At least until she married, a possibility which Dave quickly shoved to the back of his mind. He did not like to consider such a possibility, could not really bear to even think about it; not yet, anyway. He would cross that bridge when he got to it. For now, it was enough that she was coming home.

The sound of a carriage coming up the drive brought his thoughts back to the present. Uncle Thad apparently had heard it, too, and was already shuffling towards the front door. Dave could not imagine who would be calling on them at such a late hour, particularly on such a raw night. Not in the mood to receive visitors, he sighed vexedly and walked towards the foyer, but halfway across the room he came to an abrupt halt as he heard, rather than saw, Jody happily greeting the old darky. He stood motionless, quite unable to move, his throat constricting tightly until Jody finally walked hesitantly into the parlor. For moments which seemed like hours, they faced each other in total silence, neither able to speak as their eyes met and held. There was no need for words; that one look communicated all. The spell was suddenly broken as Mammy Lou and Cheryl, who also had heard Jody's voice, came rushing into the room. Slowly Jody dragged her eyes away from Dave and turned to Cheryl who, though slightly tipsy, greeted her with outstretched arms, then broke into a flood of weeping.

Mammy Lou was containing her emotions only slightly better as she stood behind the two girls, clasping and unclasping her large black hands with visible delight.

"Oh, Lawd, hit's gwine to be al'rat now!" she exclaimed over and over. "Miss Jody am heah at las'! Mah baby's cum home an' she's all growed up. Ain' she pretty, Mis't Dave—ain' mah baby pretty!"

"Yes she is, Mammy Lou, quite pretty—and quite grown up," he murmured, inwardly shaken to discover

just how lovely Jody had become during her absence. Even more beautiful than he had remembered.

With Jody's return, life at Belle Glen became more bearable for Dave, even quite pleasant at times. Cheryl's drinking had subsided somewhat, and she even went so far as to join Dave and Jody in the parlor after supper each night. Cheryl was usually pleasant enough to her sister, though there were times when Dave detected an edge to her voice which perplexed him. It seemed that she always made a point of interrupting any conversation he had with Jody, particularly if they were discussing a subject on which she could not personally comment. Unfortunately this was most often the case, since their conversations frequently stemmed from their mutual anxiety over Belle Glen's crop failure the previous year. Dave was desperately trying to cut expenses and make ends meet until the new crop could be picked. Jody, who was familiar with the problem, was able to contribute some helpful suggestions, as well as lend a sympathetic ear to Dave's worries. The crop failure obviously did not interest Cheryl in the least and she made no attempt to understand the situation. It became obvious that, since Cheryl was not interested in the problem, she had no intention of tolerating such discussions.

Dave was puzzled by her attitude, and with good reason. Cheryl still occupied her own bedroom, making it quite clear that she was not ready to resume their marital relationship. Yet he seemed to detect a resentfulness on her part regarding any companionship that he and Jody might have.

Had he understood her better, he would have realized that Cheryl was becoming increasingly jealous of Jody. This possibility never occurred to him, however, since she still clung to her aloofness whenever she was not jabbing him with barbed remarks. He had no way of knowing that she had ceased to lock her bedroom door at night, had stopped locking it almost immediately after Jody's return in hopes that he would, one night, come to her again. Had he known of this recent change of attitude, he would

have been delighted, but he did not. And Cheryl still had too much pride to openly come to him, so the silent battle continued to rage between them.

As for Jody, life ranged from extreme happiness, when Dave and she were mapping out plans for Belle Glen's future, to sheer torment, when she was forced to remember that this was the only part of his life that she could ever share. She often lay awake in her bed, listening for his footsteps as he walked past her door to his own bedroom which was situated next to hers. She was even aware of his bed creaking as he tossed and turned every night, was overly conscious of the fact that he frequently paced the floor until the wee hours of morning. Had he but known, the nights were also the worst for Jody, for his torment was her own.

Nor was Jody's unhappiness eased by the sudden news of her cousin's recent marriage and, only months later, her first confinement. While she was happy for Luanne, her own future seemed bleak indeed. There was little for her to do at Belle Glen and social functions bored her, so life seemed dull and empty most days, except on those treasured, rare occasions when she was given the opportunity to share a little of Dave's life.

Cheryl had recently taken an interest in several organizations and now spent a great deal of time away from home. In fact, when she could not find anything else on her social agenda, she would order the carriage and drive into town to shop. Much to Dave's dismay and Jody's disgust, she seemed to be oblivious to the seriousness of their financial situation and continued to spend money as though it were going out of style. Whenever Dave rebuked her for such extravagance, she either turned a deaf ear to him or flew into a rage, stamping out of the house more determined than ever to do as she pleased.

Jody tried to explain the situation to her, but quickly regretted it. A heated argument soon followed in which Cheryl openly accused her of being in love with Dave and even went so far as to suggest that they probably had already engaged in an affair behind her back.

Jody had been stunned, almost frightened, by Cheryl's

sudden animosity. Not only that, but if Cheryl could so easily see her true feelings towards Dave, then how was it possible that he, too, was not aware of how she felt? After that unfortunate incident, she avoided him whenever possible, for she could not bear the thought of his being kind to her out of pity.

As the weeks passed, Jody's loneliness increased, and in the end, she finally consented to take part in the social functions she so despised. At Cheryl's insistence she even went so far as to permit several admirers to call on her at Belle Glen. The most frequent of these was a handsome young aristocrat, John Dalton, whom Dave heartily disliked.

At the age of twenty-four, John had already succeeded in running through the entire inheritance left to him by his mother, who had died only two years before. He was a gambler at heart, though not a good one, and spent most of his time racing horses, playing cards, or making risky, if not actually bad, business investments. As a result he was on the verge of bankruptcy and now was faced with the possibility of losing the last of his inheritance, his plantation.

He was delighted when Jody finally permitted him to call on her at Belle Glen, for he had always found her to be interesting, particularly since her return from Europe. To him, she had everything to offer a man; beauty, position and, most of all, wealth in her own right.

As could be expected, Dave did not share Cheryl's enthusiasm for Jody's suitors, particularly John Dalton. He immediately saw the young man for what he was, an opportunist, and firmly hoped Jody would also see John in his true light rather than be swept off her feet by his ardent attentions.

It was Cheryl's idea that John be invited to supper one night and, to Dave's dismay, Jody agreed to her sister's suggestion. The meal proved to be quite an ordeal for Dave, who ended up only toying with his food and half-heartedly listening to the conversation which was going on around him. He said little, but occasionally cast a dark,

foreboding glance in Jody's direction as she continued to chat gaily with John.

She was unusually gay and witty tonight, Dave noted wryly, as though actually enjoying the lavish attention she was receiving from her guest. To add to his irritation, he had never seen her looking lovelier or more provocative, her white muslin gown cut so low as to reveal the cleavage between her well-rounded breasts. Repeatedly he looked her way, silently willing her to look at him, and when she did not, his irritation expanded into cold rage. It was beginning to look as if Jody might be seriously interested in John after all, obnoxious though he might be.

When Jody agreed to take a stroll in the moonlit garden with John after supper, Dave's agitation was such that it was all he could do to concentrate on his stilted conversation with Cheryl, who, oddly enough, seemed to be in a good mood for once.

Dave's ill-concealed frustration did not go undetected by Cheryl for long, and her suspicions regarding his feelings towards her sister were quickly confirmed. Only recently she had begun to realize that, if she were to regain Dave's affection, drastic changes would have to be made quite soon, changes which would involve their moving away from Belle Glen—and Jody. But would Dave ever agree to such a move, she wondered, or was it already too late?

A frown puckered her delicate brow as she contemplated how to go about bringing up the subject without her reasons becoming too obvious.

"Dave, what would you say if I told you I'd like to move into our own home?" she began cautiously. Seeing the look of surprise on his face, she quickly continued. "Now that Jody's home, there isn't any reason why we should stay on here, is there?"

Dave slowly lit a cheroot, then raising one arrogant brow, shot her a skeptical look before answering.

"You quite amaze me, my dear. I somehow got the impression that you were not in the least bit anxious to move to Oakhaven."

"But I am, Dave. Truly I am. I—I know you were dis-

appointed when I didn't want to leave Belle Glen, especially after you had worked so hard to have it ready for us after we were married. But it just seemed that there was always some reason why we couldn't move. First my miscarriage, and then Aunt Lettie's death. But I've always loved the house and hoped that someday we might be able to live there," she finished breathlessly.

"You must know that it has always been my wish that we live there and, if you're really serious, I see no reason why it can't be arranged. As a matter of fact, it would only take a few days to get everything in readiness, so we could probably move in next week, if you like."

Cheryl was so pleased that without thinking, she threw her arms around Dave's neck and lightly brushed his cheek with her lips. Delighted by her obvious pleasure in moving to their new home, Dave's arms reached out and encircled her waist, pulling her close as he began verbalizing his plans for the move.

"I suppose we'd better send a few of the hands over to Oakhaven to clean up the house, and Mammy Lou and Uncle Thad could start packing our clothes tomorrow. We can send our own belongings over first, then Jody's can follow in a day or two."

"Jody's!" exclaimed Cheryl, jerking back from him.

"Why of course. You certainly don't plan to leave her here in this big house by herself, do you?" Dave answered with obvious disbelief.

Cheryl bit back an angry retort and forced a smile to her lips. "Oh, I hardly think she'll be by herself much longer. After all, she's quite grown now and certainly old enough to marry."

"Marry! Who in the hell is she going to marry? Certainly not that popinjay outside!" Dave snapped.

"But Dave, surely you can see that she's quite taken with John. He's really not such a bad sort, you know. Besides, if Jody does marry him, I'm sure he'll settle down. If she loves him—well, I'm sure you wouldn't want to stand in the way of her happiness," she finished lamely, hoping she had not overplayed her hand.

"Of course I don't," came the gruff reply, "but that

shiftless dandy is hardly the one, I think, who will make her happy. He's run through every cent he inherited, just as he'll run through everything Jody has. In fact, I think that's the only reason he's so damned interested in her anyway—her money and Belle Glen."

It was unfortunate that Jody, who had just seen John to his carriage, walked through the side door just in time to catch the last of Dave's remark. Shaking with rage, she glared coldly at Dave for several moments before finally finding her voice.

"Thank you, my dear brother-in-law, for your vote of confidence. However, John just might like me for myself, you know. In any case, it's really none of your concern, since I'm hardly your responsibility."

Before Dave could reply, she swept past him and walked towards the stairs. He wanted to go after her, try to make amends if possible; instead, he turned back to Cheryl.

"Well, dearest, that seems to settle it," she said with satisfaction as she put her arm through his. "It's been obvious to me from the beginning that Jody is quite taken with John. In fact, she all but told me she was in love with him just this very afternoon," she smoothly lied.

Dave clenched his jaw and silently swore as he extinguished the lights in the parlor. As they walked arm in arm up the long curving staircase and he saw the inviting look in Cheryl's eyes, his black mood gradually diminished. Tonight, he knew, her door would not be closed to him, and for that much at least he could be thankful. To hell with Jody! If John Dalton was what she wanted, he grimly decided, then so be it.

Chapter XIII

Dave and Cheryl moved to Oakhaven the next week, leaving Jody alone and desolate at the old house. Dave had hesitantly asked her if she would like to live with them until her own future was settled, but Jody had abruptly declined the invitation and the subject was closed.

His excitement over moving into the new house had greatly diminished upon learning that Jody would not be moving with them. If Cheryl took notice of this, she was not visibly bothered by it. She was too busy planning the arranging of her new home.

On a sultry August afternoon, a few days after they had settled in at Oakhaven, Jody decided to ride over to the small pond where she had swum as a child. It was the same pond which she and Dave had visited on that day she had first shown him around the plantation. The pond was, in fact, on the boundary line which separated Belle Glen from Oakhaven and was so secluded that Jody believed no one, other than herself, ever came there.

Stripping off her clothes and hanging them on a nearby branch, she carelessly threw her large white towel on the grass, then walked to the water's edge and dived in with a splash. After she had been swimming for a few minutes and had sufficiently cooled off, she waded out of the water

and wrapped the towel around herself in sarong-like fashion. Then, reclining on the grassy bank, she closed her eyes and basked in the warm sunlight which filtered through the branches of the moss-covered trees.

It was some time later when she became dimly aware of branches and twigs snapping nearby. Sitting up abruptly and pulling the towel more tightly around her, she sprang to her feet and started towards the bush that held her clothes. The noise, she realized, could be that of a wild animal or, even worse, a prowling slave, and a sense of uneasiness swept over her as she listened for the next sound. As she reached for her clothes, Dave appeared in the clearing, sitting astride his black stallion. Relieved, Jody leaned against a big oak tree and stared dumbly at him.

Dave lithely dismounted and carelessly threw the reins over a low branch, then walked slowly towards her. Neither spoke as his dark gaze boldly traveled over her barely concealed body, devouring its loveliness as though to imprint her image in his mind.

Aware of the intensity of his stare, Jody felt the blood rush to her face and was suddenly irked with him for intruding into her privacy.

Dave saw her vexed expression and smiled amusedly.

"Ah, my dear Jody, do forgive my untimely arrival, won't you? It was such a hot day, I'm afraid that I had the same idea as you."

"I—I was just about to leave," she stammered. "If you'll just turn the other way, I'll get dressed."

"If you insist," he answered mockingly, a sardonic grin lighting up his dark features as he turned away from her.

Within minutes Jody scrambled out of the bushes, fully clothed though still barefoot. Sitting down on a fallen log, she silently pulled on her boots, acutely aware that Dave had turned around and was looking intently in her direction. Her nerves were so on edge that she jumped when, finally, he broke the silence which had engulfed them.

"Jody, that night you overheard Cheryl and me talking—I didn't mean to say some of the things I did. At least, I didn't intend for you to hear them."

A feeling of humiliation washed over her as she was reminded of his unforgivable words. "I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind," came her curt reply. "I suppose you can't help but feel that any man interested in me, rather than in Cheryl, could only be after my money."

"You know damn well that's not true," he hotly declared. "I just don't want you to make a mistake that could ruin your life. Dalton's incapable of thinking of anyone but himself. He's no good, Jody. Not for you, anyway."

"And I happen to disagree with you. John isn't that way at all, and I think he loves me for myself."

Realizing he was fighting a losing battle, Dave wearily sighed. "You're just not going to listen, are you? And I suppose you've already decided to marry him, so there's not much point in my arguing with you."

"No, there isn't," she answered shortly, standing up to leave.

Tears clouded her sea-green eyes as she started towards her mare, blinding her so that she stumbled and fell to her knees. It was then that they both saw the ugly coil of the deadly rattlesnake which was only inches from Jody's leg. The rattle that immediately followed sounded death-like, causing her to freeze even as the viper drew itself into a tighter coil just before striking out at her.

Dave's reflexes sprang alive as he pulled a derringer from his belt and took hasty aim. The small bullet found its mark only a split second too late, for the deadly fangs had already penetrated Jody's leg just below the knee. The hideous creature slowly writhed before coming to a halt at Jody's feet, victorious even in death.

Dave rushed over to Jody, who had turned pale with fright, and gently laid her down on the mossy bank. Pulling out his pocket knife, he hesitated only briefly before making an incision across the fang marks which were already causing her leg to swell. A soft moan escaped her lips as he bent over to suck the deadly venom from the ugly wound. This done, he quickly jerked off his belt and tied it tightly just below her knee.

Looking anxiously at her, Dave struggled not to show his alarm. "I'd better get you home, Jody," he said quietly as he picked her up and carried her to where his mount was tied. Gently he deposited her in the saddle, then mounted behind her, gathering her into his strong arms and cradling her as though she were made of precious glass. Jody rested her head against his broad chest and, feeling chilled, snuggled closer to the warmth of his body.

Dave nudged the stallion into a slow walk, trying not to jar Jody any more than was necessary. As anxiety overcame him, he nuzzled her hair with his cheek and murmured:

"Ah, Jody, why is it I always seem to hurt the very one I love the most—for I've always loved you, you know."

But Jody did not know, nor was she able to hear him. The pain had become so intense that for the first time in her life she had fainted.

The next few days were a nightmare for Dave, who never left Jody's side. Doc Blanks had checked on her constantly, but he informed Dave that nothing else could be done for her and that only time would tell. Dave immediately sent word to Cheryl by a very upset Uncle Thad. She came at once, but her concern was minimized by the jealousy she felt towards her sister. Realizing there was little she could do to help and resenting her husband's obvious concern over Jody, Cheryl returned to Oakhaven.

As Jody's fever mounted to dangerous proportions, Dave took turns with Mammy Lou, bathing her with cool water, hoping to break her high fever. The wounded leg swelled hideously, turning black, and Jody was frequently racked with violent spells of vomiting.

Refusing to sleep despite Mammy Lou's protests, Dave insisted on staying up with Jody at night, for he was determined to be on hand when the crisis stage came. And it was at night that Jody always seemed to brush the closest with death, causing him to become almost sick with anxiety. It was then that she was the most delirious, muttering incoherent words over and over. Dave desper-

ately tried to understand what she was trying to say, but he was unable to do so until the third night, when her raving became suddenly quite clear.

"Don't leave me, Dave—please don't! I don't want to marry John. Don't make me go to him!" she muttered repeatedly. Then, "Don't go to Cheryl—you can't—I love you! I've always loved you!"

Over and over she cried out to him, her pitiful pleas tormenting him almost beyond endurance. Until now he had not been fully aware of the grief he had caused her; now he inwardly cursed himself for hurting her so, for ruining both their lives as well as Cheryl's. Hurt to the very depths of his being, he leaned over and laid his head on the pillow beside hers, and for the first time since he was a boy, he prayed, until finally he dozed off in exhaustion.

Some time later he was abruptly awakened as he felt the bed tremble. Glancing quickly at Jody, he saw that her fever had broken and that she was having a violent chill.

"Cold," she muttered, "so cold."

Piling every cover he could find on top of her and wiping the sweat from her brow, Dave waited for the chill to subside, but it stubbornly persisted.

He hesitated for a moment, then slowly pulled back the covers and got into bed beside her. Gently he pulled her closer to him, cradling her in his arms until, minutes later, the chill finally subsided. But even after Jody fell into a peaceful sleep, he held her tightly to him, acutely conscious of the softness of her young body. It was not until the pale fingers of dawn sifted into the room that he reluctantly left her side and started for home, where a hurt and angry Cheryl awaited him.

Jody slowly began to recover, and the swelling in her leg, along with the discoloration, disappeared. Weakened and visibly thinner, she was unable to leave her bed for several days. During that time she received many visitors who called to inquire about her recovery, but the one caller she most wanted to see never appeared. It puzzled her,

for she had discovered from Mammy Lou that Dave rode by daily to check on her, yet he never came up to her bedroom to personally check on her.

As her disappointment reached its peak one day, she grumpily complained to Mammy Lou about Dave's apparent lack of concern for her.

Mammy Lou, who was disapprovingly aware of the situation between Dave and Jody, gruffly scolded her as though she were a small child.

"De tru'ble wid you, Miss Jody, is dat you am lying up in dis heah baid, gittin' sp'iled an' enj'winin feelin' sorry fo' yo'sef," she said as she briskly adjusted the bedcovers. "Why, dat man hardly slep' fo' three days an' 'nites, sittin' up an' bathin' you all ober, jes' lak you wuz uh lil' chile."

Jody abruptly sat up in bed and glared at the old woman. "Oh no, Mammy Lou, you don't mean that you let *him* bathe me? Not all over!" she exclaimed with horror.

"Well, sum'body heds to do hit, honey. He jes' up an' med me go to baid at 'nite, so's ah could gits mah res' he sez, an' dey wuz no one else dat he'd allows to cum near you."

Seeing the distressed look on Jody's face, she added gently, "He only done whut hads to be done, honey, same's he'd uh done fo' his own sistah, ah reckons."

This last remark cut Jody to the quick, for she was fast coming to believe that Dave's concern had always been that of a big brother. His absence showed better than words his relief at being rid of her. Crossly she slid down deeper into the feather bed, an irritable frown appearing on her lovely face.

A week later, Mammy Lou and Uncle Thad carefully seated Jody in a rocker on the front veranda. It was her first day to be up and about, and though she was still weak, the pale pink frock she wore added color to her otherwise pale appearance. Her thoughts drifted aimlessly as she enjoyed the cool autumn day, noting with pleasure the loveliness of the various trees in the first stages of their colorful autumn splendor.

Thinking back on her close brush with death, Jody was again reminded of the dream which had continually plagued her since she had regained consciousness. In her dream she had shamefully told Dave that she loved him and, abandoning all pride, had begged him not to send her away. Somewhere in that garbled dream, she vividly recalled feeling the warmth of his strong body next to hers, but this was as far as the dream went. She tried to push it from her mind, but it repeatedly bounced back again. The dream seemed so real that she began to wonder where it left off and reality began. If in her delirium she had blurted out her love for him, she felt that Dave must now think her a fool. This might be the explanation for his prolonged absence as well as for his total lack of interest in her recovery.

The nearby call of a mockingbird brought Jody abruptly back to the present as, looking down the curving lane which led to the river road, she noticed a man approaching on a huge black stallion. She immediately recognized Dave, and her heart began to beat wildly as she anxiously waited for him to dismount.

Smiling at her, Dave silently walked up the wide steps and crossed over to where she sat. Shyly Jody looked up at him. She immediately noticed that his eyes looked tired, and that his face seemed a little thinner, more drawn. Her heart went out to him, for she somehow sensed that all was not well with him.

"How are you, Dave?" she asked with a timid smile.

"That's what I intended to ask you. And I might add, I think you're looking as lovely as ever, though perhaps a little too thin," he replied as he sat down in a nearby chair.

"Thank you, kind sir," she laughed, then became sober, a flush slowly appearing on her lovely face. "Mammy Lou told me what you—I mean, how patient you were with me. I guess I must have been quite a trial to you."

"You know better than that, Jody," he interrupted, bending over to take her hand. "You could never be a trial to me, not ever."

Flustered by his nearness, Jody frantically tried to think of a safer subject to discuss.

"How are things coming along at Oakhaven?"

"About as well as could be expected, I reckon," he replied wryly.

"By the way, did you ever buy those railroad stocks you were talking about?" she asked in an attempt to hide her confusion.

Sensing her uneasiness, Dave dropped her hand and leaned back in his chair. "No, I decided to wait until the right moment, assuming, of course, that the right moment occurs."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, unless I miss my guess, we're headed for some pretty difficult times in the very near future."

"What kind of difficult times?" Jody asked with a puzzled frown.

"A depression. I've halfway been expecting one ever since Jackson was reelected and began removing government funds from the U.S. Bank. It's been slow in coming about, but I think the time is just about here."

"But John says the country is booming, and he's trying to buy up all the different stocks he can get his hands on."

Resenting her comparing his opinion to that of John, Dave gruffly replied, "And in my opinion John is a damn fool! Why buy stocks now when in a few short months they can probably be bought at a much cheaper price?"

"Well, if what you say is true, why would anyone want to buy them at all?" she asked, trying to understand his viewpoint. "Wouldn't they just be worthless if we did have a depression?"

"Not necessarily. If the country does have a depression, it's true that some stocks would be worthless, those belonging to companies which will go bankrupt. But not all of them will, though their stocks will undoubtedly depreciate. In any case, the only way you'd want to buy any stocks would be with the realization that it would be a risky gamble at best. If a person had a little extra cash on hand, though, cash which he felt that he could risk losing,

it would be a very worthwhile gamble. You see, no matter how great the depression, the country eventually will recover. It always has before and it always will. When it recovers this time, I believe that railroad stocks, for instance, will be more valuable than ever."

"How would a depression affect us and all of the other large planters?" Jody asked.

"It's hard to say. Right now, cotton is in high demand, due to the shortage caused by the crop failure last year, and it's bringing a damn good price. On the other hand, if a depression were to hit, the price of cotton could very easily take a beating, and that would hurt us a great deal. The country as a whole is living way beyond its means—you might say living off worthless credit. It's bound to catch up with us sometime, in spite of Jackson's Specie Circular."

"What's that?" asked Jody.

Dave smiled, amused that as well versed as Jody was on most subjects she had little knowledge of the country's uneasy economic situation; but of course it would have been highly unusual for any woman to know of such things. Finances were rarely discussed in the presence of ladies. Completely relaxed and enjoying the opportunity to expound his theories, he briefly tried to bring her up to date on the controversial subject of the circular.

"In short, it provides that as of August 15 only hard cash, such as gold, silver, and, in some cases, Virginia land script, will be accepted by the government in payment for public lands. It will, however, permit the receipt of paper money for up to three hundred and twenty acres of land, bought by actual settlers or residents of the state, until sometime in December. You see, Jody, this will repress a lot of fraud going on in this country right now, and it will also discourage the land speculators from trying to get a monopoly on public lands. And it will discourage the extension of bank notes and credit, which possibly could hurt a lot of people. There are good and bad points to this circular, but I think Jackson is doing all he can to bring the country to a sounder financial footing. I just hope it isn't too little too late."

Not fully understanding the complex situation, Jody sat in silence. To her relief, he changed the subject.

"By the way, Cheryl is planning some kind of shindig so that she can show off the house. It won't be for several weeks, but we're counting on your being there. In fact, Cheryl is just waiting until you're well enough to help her get organized. If you're not careful, you'll end up doing the whole blamed thing!" he added wryly as he stood up to leave.

"Oh, how nice! What kind of a shindig will it be?" she asked brightly, wanting to prolong his visit as long as possible.

"A barbecue and possibly a dance afterwards. Think you can make it?"

"Of course," she laughed, "but just how many hogs do you think Cheryl will have me turning on the spit?"

"Probably all of them," he chuckled, mounting his stallion in one lithe movement.

Waving goodbye, Jody watched him canter off towards Oakhaven and unconsciously gave a despondent sigh. Well, she thought forlornly, even if he does think of me as a sister, at least he always seems to enjoy talking to me.

"What more can I expect under the circumstances?" she murmured to herself as she got up to go into the house.

Chapter XIV

Resentful over Dave's neglect of her during Jody's illness, Cheryl once again exerted her privilege to maintain separate bedrooms. Dave made no comment when, without warning, she had his belongings moved to another room, nor was he unduly upset by her refusal to speak to him for days afterwards. It was becoming apparent that he and Cheryl seemed fated to spend more time in disharmony than in harmony, a fact which sometimes caused him to wonder if other husbands were subjected to the same unpleasantness he now experienced daily.

As the end of September rolled around, Cheryl was making big plans for the barbecue out of sheer determination more than actual enjoyment. She had been unwell lately, and finally her worst suspicions were confirmed. She was pregnant again. Knowing that this bit of news would make Dave extremely happy, she obstinately withheld the information from him. She had no intention of contributing to his happiness until she had to and bitterly blamed him for getting her pregnant in the first place.

When the day for the barbecue finally arrived, Cheryl mustered up all of her determination and stood possessively beside her husband as they greeted their guests. The Harrisons and their two girls, Becky and Jane, were

the first to arrive, followed by the Valentines, then a score of others.

The Blakes came a little later, with Emily in her usual state of twittering while she looked lovingly at her somber husband. Miss Bert stood behind the young couple and smiled approvingly as she unconsciously swelled with pride. They did indeed make a striking couple, and it was quite obvious that Emily adored her new husband. The fact that she failed to have much common sense did not upset Miss Bert in the least, nor did she think it appeared to be too noticeable to others. Little did she suspect that, many times after their visits, Cheryl low-rated the girl to Dave, mimicking her and making extremely unkind remarks.

"Honestly, if Emily had a brain, she'd take it out and play with it," Cheryl often remarked scathingly. She could not abide Emily's addle-brained simpering and deeply resented the boredom she was forced to endure whenever she was unable to avoid the girl's company. At first Dave could not understand her animosity towards the young girl, who seemed incapable of anything other than kindness, but later he began to suspect that jealousy was the underlying motive behind Cheryl's caustic remarks—jealousy over Steve.

Amusedly he watched as Cheryl brightly greeted Emily, briefly commented on how well she was looking, then turned with relief to the Joneses, who were the last to arrive. Everyone seemed to be there—everyone except Jody.

His impatience mounted as he waited for her to appear. She had not set foot inside the house since they had settled in, and suddenly he was anxious for her to see it, to give her approval on his new home. It should have been *their* home, his and Jody's, he thought wistfully, then realized the futility of his thoughts. He was beginning to despair that she would not come at all when the door was suddenly opened and Jody glided in on the arm of John Dalton.

Cheryl momentarily stiffened at the sight of her sister, resentment flooding over her as she caught the brief look

of admiration on her husband's face as he enthusiastically welcomed her sister to their new home. Quickly she recovered her aplomb and added her welcome to that of her husband.

"I'm so sorry I haven't been over to see you since your illness, Jody, but you know how busy I've been getting settled in, plus getting ready for this barbecue," she remarked glibly. "Anyway, Dave seemed to have everything in hand the day that I did manage to come, so I would probably just have been in the way."

"Of course I understood, Cheryl. I wouldn't have wanted you to see me in the state I was in anyway, nor would I even have known that you were there. I understand that I was delirious part of the time, and that would just have upset you," Jody murmured with understanding.

Cheryl visibly relaxed and commented favorably on Jody's new gown, a pale yellow muslin which served to accent her dark hair and creamy complexion.

Dave's dark gaze also took in Jody's appearance, more appreciatively than his wife's, however. Dainty white mittens covered the small hands that nervously fidgeted with the pendant hanging at the base of her throat. With a rush of tenderness he realized it was the same pendant he had given her on his first Christmas at Belle Glen. Did his gift have any special meaning for her now; he wondered, then brushed aside the thought as he noted the way she smiled up at John as he escorted her to the punch bowl.

It was after everyone had finished eating the succulent barbecue that the guests gradually began breaking up into smaller groups. The ladies set out to explore the newly decorated house and spacious grounds while the men gathered in different corners to discuss horse racing and politics.

Dave, Steve, John Dalton and four other gentlemen adjourned to the study for a smoke. A discussion of the massacre at the Alamo the previous spring quickly arose, each man expounding on what he thought should have been done to prevent the tragedy which had occurred. All agreed that had the fort been properly manned against

Santa Anna's force of three thousand Mexicans, the attack would never have succeeded. It was amazing that only a handful of men, outnumbered and ill-equipped, had withstood such a brutal onslaught for as long as they had.

Soon tiring of that particular topic, John brought up the matter of the Species Circular and a heated discussion soon followed. John staunchly supported the U.S. Bank, declaring that "anyone who thought this country was on the edge of a depression was an utter fool." Steve, whose opinions were the same as Dave's, quickly disagreed, and eventually everyone in the room was arguing the point.

It took a great deal of effort for Dave to hold his temper in check and assume the air of a gracious host. He had an inkling that Jody had mentioned his views on the subject to John and that John's remark had been aimed deliberately at him. There had never been any love lost between the two of them but Dave refused to be goaded into an argument while John was his guest.

It was Steve, who, sensing Dave's unleashed temper, wisely changed the subject.

"Say, did any of you read that article in the *Picayune* last week about the growing strength of the abolitionists?" he asked smoothly.

Dave shot him an appreciative look, then visibly relaxed as he answered:

"As a matter of fact, I did. Seems like they're picking up strength all over the country, particularly in the District of Columbia."

"Looks like there's a lot of folks up there gettin' all riled up over slavery, when it's none of their damn business," muttered Ben Johnson. "All them petitions flowing into Congress, requesting the halt of slave trade in the District of Columbia. Just like a damn Yankee to go stickin' his nose into other folk's business."

"Goldarned bunch of fools, if'n you ask me," snorted Roy Valentine.

"Well, gentlemen, if the North wants to throw slavery out the window, more power to 'em—just as long as they

don't expect the South to follow suit," Steve commented dryly before lighting a cheroot.

"My sentiments exactly, Steve," agreed Dave, "although if Congress ever does pass such a bill, I'm afraid we won't have much to say about it."

"The hell we won't!" John exclaimed hotly. "Why, the plantation system couldn't withstand the withdrawal of slavery. Our whole social and economic structure would collapse around our ears!"

"If it comes to that, I daresay Mississippi will secede from the Union and so will most of the other southern states," Ben expounded.

"That may not be as simple as it sounds," Dave returned. "Provided that the government would allow the southern states to secede, which I rather doubt, our economic structure would still suffer. We'd have a hell of a time keeping up with the times without the support of the Yanks' trading market, as well as the other benefits we receive from the North."

John was bullheadedly arguing this point when Cheryl suddenly appeared in the doorway and requested the gentlemen to join the ladies in the next room. Reluctant to end the discussion, as well as their cheroots, the men grudgingly complied with her suggestion and followed her into the adjoining parlor.

The ball which followed the barbecue was a gala affair. Gay music was played by a small group of hired musicians as the lovely belles and their handsome escorts waltzed around the ballroom in a fast, whirling motion.

Dave was reminded of the New Year's ball when he had claimed Jody as his partner. He hardly imagined that he would be able to claim her for even one dance tonight, judging from the way all the eligible young men were flocking around her. Without doubt she had become the center of attention, the belle of the ball, though she seemed scarcely affected by her newly acquired popularity. Gaily she chatted with her throng of admirers while Cheryl and John stood nearby and listened broodingly, each envious for completely different, yet selfish, reasons.

Cheryl could not help but remember that only a few

years before she, too, had received such attention. Now, she realized disgustedly, in a few short months she would grow so hideously out of proportion that no man would think of looking twice at her. There was certainly nothing charming about being pregnant, she thought bitterly, but managed to force a smile to her lips as she turned to Steve, who was watching Emily dance with one of his friends.

"Aren't you going to dance with me, Steve?"

"Of course, Cheryl. It will be my pleasure."

"What's wrong, Steve? You seem to be a million miles away tonight," she commented.

"Nothing's wrong; at least, nothing that dancing with you won't help, my dear."

"You're still such a flatterer, Steve. You always know how to say just the right thing to a girl," she remarked lightly.

"And you, Mrs. Devan, seem to get prettier every time I see you," he chuckled, amused and flattered by Cheryl's flirtatious remark. "I do believe married life must be agreeing with you."

Cheryl's smile suddenly faded. "I doubt that married life ever agrees with anybody—unless, of course, the couple is very much in love."

Steve sobered, and seeing her troubled look, frowned. It had not occurred to him that all might not be well between Cheryl and Dave, and the sudden realization of such a possibility disturbed him. His hand tightened on her waist as he whirled her around the room, gracefully keeping time with the fast tempo of the waltz.

"What's wrong, honey? Things not right between you and Dave?"

Cheryl's liquid blue eyes suddenly misted and her voice had a small catch to it when she was finally able to answer.

"No—no, they're not. I guess things have never been right between us, not even from the start. We—we just seem to make each other miserable," she admitted forlornly.

"But you love him, don't you?"

"I don't know, Steve. I just honestly don't know anymore."

Seeing that she was on the verge of tears, Steve tactfully waltzed her out to the veranda, then ushered her down the wide steps which led to the garden. Neither spoke as they strolled along the curving path, finally coming to a stop beneath a large magnolia tree which sheltered a wrought-iron love seat. After he had dusted off a clean place, Cheryl sat down and spread her wide skirts gracefully over the bench.

The smell of autumn scented the brisk night air and crickets chirped loudly from nearby. Breaking the silence, Steve cleared his throat rather hesitantly. He disliked meddling in other's affairs, but he instinctively knew that Cheryl needed to confide in someone.

"Now, what is it, Cheryl? What's the trouble between you and Dave?"

"I—I guess our marriage was a mistake. I should never have married him. He doesn't really love me, you see. I'm not even sure that I love *him* anymore, and to make things worse, I'm with child again and—and I don't want to have a baby! Not now, anyway."

The last bit of her composure was swept away by her confession and tears slid slowly down her pale cheeks as, silently, she beseeched him to understand.

Steve sat down beside her and gently covered her trembling hands with his own. "You mustn't say that, Cheryl. Dave loves you far more than you realize. If he doesn't quite measure up to all your expectations, try to be patient with him. Try to remember that married life is new to him, too. You should realize by now that all couples have a certain amount of adjustment to make, particularly during those first years of living together."

She was strongly tempted to tell him about her suspicions regarding Dave's feelings towards Jody, but pride checked her impulse. A troubled sigh escaped her quivering lips as she looked up at him.

"But Steve, how do you know, really know, when you

do love someone? There was a time when I thought I did love Dave," she murmured, adding wryly, "but there was also a time when I thought I was in love with you."

"There are many kinds of love, my dear. You and I have always had a place in our hearts for each other, and we always will. Which is as it should be, I think, considering that we practically grew up under the same roof. But it was never meant for us to marry."

"Why, Steve? Everything would have been so much simpler that way," she sobbed. "I could have been happy with you, and I know I could have made you happy. Dave and I have just ended up making each other miserable. We—we seldom even speak to each other any more."

Although it had never been Steve's intention to reveal to Cheryl the true reason behind his marriage to Emily, it now occurred to him that perhaps, just perhaps, he should have. In order to prevent her from dwelling on what might have been, he would have to tell her the truth. It was not an easy matter for him to discuss and he sought painfully for the right words to convince her that she was, indeed, lucky not to have married him. By the time he finished, he had revealed everything to her, even admitting that Emily had never been told of the affliction which invariably cropped up in their family.

"To make matters worse, Emily is also expecting a baby. As close as we can calculate, the child will come sometime after Christmas," he concluded dismally.

"Oh Steve, I'm so sorry, so ashamed. I had no idea, of course," she murmured softly. "But what will you do if the child is—is like you say it might be?"

"I don't know, Cheryl. I just don't know. Emily isn't all that pretty, I guess, nor even all that bright. But she is one of the sweetest and most unselfish persons I've ever known. To my surprise, I've grown to love her very much. The thought of her being hurt by something as grotesque as this is almost more than I can stand. I just can't tell her the truth yet. I pray to God that I never have to tell her."

"Perhaps you won't have to," she offered comfortingly. "I hope things will work out right for you, Steve, and I do appreciate your telling me the truth. It's made me see a lot of things much clearer. As you said, we always will have a special place in our hearts for each other. That will be some sort of comfort to both of us, won't it?"

"Of course it will. Who knows, in time maybe everything will work out just fine for all of us. Let's hope so, anyway."

Walking back towards the house, Steve and Cheryl felt relieved to have confided in each other. Dave, however, did not know this. Standing in a secluded corner of the long veranda, he resentfully watched them walk arm in arm into the house.

Although Dave had ceased to hope that Cheryl might come to love him, he did expect her to remain faithful and to show some outward signs of loyalty to him. In fact, that much he demanded. How she felt about Steve was one thing, but what she did about it was quite another. Later that night and in the privacy of their once-shared bedroom, Dave laid down the law to her, his cold ultimatum bringing about their worst, perhaps most damaging, quarrel.

Cheryl had just slipped into a white lace dressing gown and was sitting at her dressing table brushing her silvery-blond hair when Dave strode angrily into the room.

As she turned with a look of unguarded surprise, he could not help noticing how fragile she looked. For a brief second his resolve weakened, until she spoke.

"Just what do you want?" she asked sharply.

Dave's irritation quickly returned and, giving Cheryl a diabolical grin, he sat down in a nearby chair.

"I hardly expected you to welcome me with open arms," he remarked sarcastically while extracting a cheroot from his vest, "but I might remind you that, as your husband, I do have the right to come in here whenever I damn well please."

Cheryl had better sense than to argue the point with

him, but she had no intention of allowing him to cow her either.

"Must you smoke in my bedroom? You know how I detest the odor," she snapped disagreeably as she turned back to the mirror and resumed brushing her hair.

"It seems to me that there are a great many things you detest lately—the most noticeable one being me," he answered caustically, and ignoring her disapproving frown, he lit the end of his cheroot.

"I see that you're in another one of your ugly moods, in spite of the lovely evening we've just had."

"By we I assume that you mean you and Steve?"

Cheryl slammed her brush down on the table and angrily turned to face him. "And just what do you mean by that?"

Arching one shaggy brow as was his habit whenever vexed, Dave studied her for a moment. He was amused by her composure. Had he not known her so well, he might even have believed her to be quite innocent.

"Come now, my pet. Isn't it a little late to be playing the innocent?" he remarked acidly, flicking an ash to the carpet.

Cheryl sensed the anger that smoldered behind her husband's unexpected accusation. Had he shouted at her or openly accused her of whatever it was he thought she had done she could have handled the situation. This type of fencing with him, however, completely unnerved her, and seeing the cold anger in his dark eyes suddenly made her feel like a defenseless animal, trapped. Determined to hide her nervousness, she got up and started to walk past him towards the bed, but Dave was ahead of her. Grabbing her small wrist in a vise-like grip, he quickly got to his feet, jerking her to him so forcefully that she gasped.

"We're not through talking yet, my love. In fact, we haven't even begun."

"As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing more to be said. I'm sick and tired of your vulgar accusations, and I have no intention of listening to them."

"Oh, you'll listen all right. You damn well better, if you value that pretty neck of yours. To get to the point, I

saw you and Steve coming out of the garden tonight. Unfortunately, so did everyone else."

"So what if they did? Does it matter?" she taunted.

"Not to me personally, perhaps, since I no longer really care whether you love me or not. In fact, I don't really give a damn who you love. But as long as you're my wife, you'll behave decently, or I'll make you wish you had! Do I make myself clear?"

"How dare you!" stammered Cheryl. "How dare you say that to me!"

"Very easily, my dear, particularly since I know you've been dying to crawl into bed with Steve ever since I've known you. If I didn't know Steve to be so damned honorable, I might think you already had," he added maliciously.

Cheryl jerked away from him, trembling with an anger which threatened to consume her. She wanted to hurt him, to make him suffer as she was suffering. Angrily she lashed out at him.

"Perhaps you don't know him as well as you think!"

"Just what in the hell do you mean by that?" he asked thickly.

"Oh, nothing much," she murmured tauntingly. "But I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell you that I'm with child again."

The barb struck home as Cheryl had intended, and renewed suspicions clouded Dave's mind. Suddenly realizing that he could never be certain that this child she was carrying was his own, his self-control snapped. Violently he grabbed her and slapped her so hard that she crumpled to the floor. Clenching his fists to keep from striking her again, he stood there for a moment and glared down at her, hatred contorting his features into a demoniacal mask. Then, without speaking, he turned and abruptly left the room, slamming the door behind him.

Cheryl watched him go as the tears sprang to her eyes and a trickle of blood slowly oozed from her mouth. Already she was regretting her hasty words, for she instinctively knew that this time she had goaded him too far. He would never forgive her, even if she were somehow able

to convince him that this baby was his and not Steve's. Rolling over and burying her bruised face in her arms, she sobbed in agony for a love she knew she had lost forever.

Chapter XV

As Jody's social activities increased during the next few months, so did her loneliness, for it seemed that she was seeing less and less of Dave. Occasionally he came by to go over pressing business matters with her, but there was nothing personal about these visits and he seldom stayed longer than was necessary. In fact, it often seemed to Jody that Dave had become unusually remote and aloof.

On one of these visits he briefly informed her of Cheryl's confinement, but he displayed no pleasure over the forthcoming event. To the contrary, he relayed the news quite impassively, almost as though he resented having to speak of it. Remembering that Cheryl's first pregnancy had ended in miscarriage, Jody decided that Dave's lack of enthusiasm was undoubtedly due to his natural concern for his wife's welfare. Had she known the truth, the reason behind his bitterness towards her sister, she would have been shocked.

As the weeks flew by and Cheryl's figure became more distorted, her uneven disposition worsened. Morning sickness and headaches plagued her constantly, causing dark circles to appear beneath her eyes, until she finally gave up all forms of social activity and remained home. And since Cheryl would not or could not come to Belle Glen, Jody made a point of dropping in at Oakhaven

several times a week, thinking each time that little bits of local gossip might cheer up her brooding sister and put her in a happier mood. It seldom did.

It was impossible not to be aware of the antagonism between Cheryl and Dave, and it became just as obvious that neither wanted the baby. Although Jody could not understand the reason for this, she quickly learned to avoid the subject altogether, for it did not take much to get Cheryl riled nowadays.

Aside from these dutiful visits, Jody was also spending a lot of time with John Dalton, who was constantly pursuing her. Hardly a day went by that he did not show up at Belle Glen, nor did he ever miss the opportunity to escort her to the many social gatherings. It was becoming obvious to everyone that it was only a matter of time before he and Jody would announce their engagement.

Jody, however, was still uncertain as to her answer if and when John did propose. Without doubt she was growing quite fond of him, for he was personable, entertaining, and even rather exciting at times. But try as she might, she could not succeed in locking Dave out of her mind, much less her heart. The idea of ever belonging to any other man, of giving herself to anyone other than Dave, repulsed her to such an extent that she automatically shied away from thinking about it. Instinctively she discouraged John from broaching the subject of marriage. He simply interpreted her actions to be nothing more than coyness and was sometimes amused by her use of such feminine, and what he considered to be obvious, tactics. If anything, her standoffish behavior attracted him all the more, so that he was more determined than ever to have her.

With this problem facing her, Jody was finding it exceedingly difficult to get into the proper spirit for the Christmas holidays. John had recently hinted that he had a very special present for her, one which he was planning to give her on Christmas Eve. Seeing the excitement in his face when he casually mentioned it one afternoon, she unhappily feared that his gift was some token which would make their engagement official. A piece of family jewelry,

which had been handed down from generation to generation, such as a bracelet, brooch or ring, was the usual binding gift. She had delicately tried to convince him that anything other than a small, inexpensive remembrance would be inappropriate at this time, but he had laughed and informed her that the gift would be quite appropriate. And from this she knew that he would not be deterred from proposing, that she would have to reach a decision soon.

To make matters worse, Cheryl had insisted on Jody's spending Christmas with them at Oakhaven. There seemed to be no getting out of it, so Jody had been forced to accept the invitation. She feared it would end up being a miserable time for everyone concerned, for she could already imagine Dave and Cheryl's exchanging cutting remarks throughout.

As if this weren't enough, Mammy Lou was insulted when she discovered that she would not be preparing the family's Christmas dinner. It was the first time she had not done so, and her resentment was quite apparent.

"Hmph!" she snorted, "Dat uppity nigga ain' got de furs' ideah how to bile a bucket ob water, mech less cook a sho' 'nuff meal!"

"Well, I'm sure it won't be as good as your cooking, Mammy, but Miss Emily said that Doshe was a fairly good cook when they owned her, so maybe the meal won't be too bad," Jody commented diplomatically, hoping to salve the old woman's feelings.

Doshe had belonged to the Blakes until last summer when Dave had bought her for his slave, Lemme. Lemme had taken a fancy to the mulatto one day when Dave had taken him along on a visit to Roselawn. For weeks afterwards Lemme had moped about listlessly. When Dave discovered the reason for Lemme's apathy, he quickly decided to try and buy her for Lemme's mate. Steve had been agreeable to the transaction taking place, for Dave's offer for the girl had been most generous. Once the sale was made, it was quite obvious that Doshe was as pleased over the arrangement as Lemme, though at first she pretended not to care much one way or the other.

Though Mammy Lou had never laid eyes on the young girl, she had already come to the conclusion that she was not going to like her, and she made no bones about it. There was only room for one good cook in the family, and, as far as she was concerned, she was that one. It mattered little to her that Dave and Cheryl had not eaten a well-prepared meal since they had moved to Oakhaven. To her way of thinking, they should never have left Belle Glen in the first place!

"Miz Cheryl had no biz'ness runnin' off to dat new place no how, an' now jes' luk at de mess ob tru'ble she am in—carryin' dat baby, an' no one to luk after her. Hit jes' ain' rat! She oughta cum bak heah whar I kin sees after her myself," she grumbled, shaking her head so hard that her fat body shook all over.

"Mammy Lou, Miss Cheryl has her own home now, and I'm sure she's being well cared for. Besides, what would Mr. Dave do if she came back to live with us?" Jody asked as she watched Mammy briskly dusting the parlor furniture.

"Hit ain' lakely he'd miss her mech frum whut I's been heahin'!"

"And just what do you mean by that?"

Aware that she had said too much, Mammy Lou bristled. "Lawdy, Miss Jody, you am always askin' questions, den puttin' de wrong wurds inter mah mouf. I don' means nuttin', an' I sho' don' knows nuttin'! You jes' fergits whut I dun' sed."

Realizing that pursuit of the matter would be useless, Jody changed the subject. Idly fingering the keyes on the pianoforte, she asked, "What do you think of Mr. John? I mean—what would you think if I decided to marry him?"

"Well, if'n you has ter think on hit, 'pears ter me lak hit mought not be sech a good idea."

"You don't like him much, do you?"

"Miss Jody, you'se a'gwine ter hab me strung up by mah thumbs fo' a uppity nigga—a'tryin' ter put wurds inter mah mouf lak dat!"

"Oh, fiddlesticks! You know that I never repeat any-

thing you tell me. But you don't like him, do you?" she asked again.

"Naw'm, I don't reckon I duz, leas'ways, not fo' mah lil' lamb," came the slow answer.

"But why?" Jody asked with a perplexed frown.

"Honey, you knows de answer ter dat as well as I duz. You don' lubs him lak you does Mist'—" she hesitated, a fearful look stealing into her black eyes.

"Like I love who?" Jody asked tensely.

"Miss Jody, I dun' seed de luk you'se hed in dem pretty eyes fo' Mist' Dave. Why, eber since he furs' cum heah, dey ain' eber been no other gempmum fo' you. An' Mist' Dave, he dun' mar'hied up wid de wrong gal, bless po' Miz Cheryl's soul." Shaking her kinky head, she added, "Sho' am a shame things gits so twixt aroun', but I reckons de good Lawd will finds a way ter straighten hit out one ob dese heah days."

Mammy Lou walked over and cradled Jody's head against her ample breast. "Don' you worry yo' pretty haid 'bout hit, lil' lamb, 'cause hit'll all wurk out fo' you sum'dey. Jes' don' jump inter sumpin' you mought be sor'hy fo' later."

As Jody leaned on Mammy Lou, the tears came to her eyes. She fervently hoped that she was right, though she could not see how things could ever come right between Dave and herself. It all seemed so utterly hopeless. Dave would always belong to Cheryl, and she would always be in love with him. Mammy Lou was right about one thing, however; there was not much room in her heart for anyone else.

On Christmas Eve Jody unenthusiastically donned her newest gown for the dinner party which was to be held at the Harrisons' plantation, Riverdale. Mammy Lou had just finished adjusting Jody's long black curls when the sound of hurried footsteps coming up the stairs interrupted the gloomy silence, followed by a frenzied knock on the door.

"Miss Jody! Miss Jody—dat gempmum is down deah in de pa'lor, an' he sez if'n I don' fetch you down deah in

a big hurry, he's a'gwine ter strip de hide off'n mah worf'less bak!" wailed a frightened Uncle Thad.

Jody and Mammy Lou looked at each other, then burst out laughing. As Mammy Lou so often pointed out, Uncle Thad usually moved, as well as talked, as slow as molasses in January. To see him in such a hurry now struck them both as being hilariously funny. Mammy Lou waddled over to the door and flung it open. There stood a very distraught Uncle Thad, with eyes as big as saucers and gnarled old hands which were tightly clenched in front of his scrawny chest as if in prayer.

"G'wine way frum dis heah do', Thad, an' tells dat—dat gempmum dat Miss Jody'll be down w'en she's good an' ready, an' not a min'ut befo'!"

"Lawd gawd, Miss Agnus! Woman, you'se lost yo' min'. I's not 'bouts ter tell him no sech thing!" Peeking around Mammy Lou, he added pleadingly, "Miss Jody, cum on down fo' Mist' John gits his'sef' sho' nuff mad!"

"All right, Uncle Thad, I'm coming," she laughed. "But you tell Mr. John that if he puts one mark on your worthless hide, he'll have to deal with me personally."

"Lawsy me," he groaned, taking Jody's command to heart, "ya'll jes' wants me ter gits mahsef' kilt sho' 'nuff! Naw'm, I ain' 'bouts ter sey no sech thing ter Mist' John. He'd string me up fo' sho'!" Uncle Thad exclaimed, trembling harder than ever. Then he scurried off, shaking his bushy gray head and grumbling to himself.

As Jody walked down the curving staircase, a sense of foreboding threatened to overwhelm her. She was sure that John intended to propose tonight, yet she still was completely uncertain as to how she should answer him. She was not in love with him, but she was quite fond of his company. He made her forget her loneliness, if only for the short time he was with her. Could she ever learn to love him? she wondered. It was strange that Mammy Lou and Uncle Thad had such an aversion to him, almost as though they sensed something sinister about him, something that for the life of her she could not see. Stranger still was Dave's obvious antipathy towards him,

an attitude which he made no attempt to conceal even in John's presence.

Trembling with uneasiness, Jody descended to the bottom step and offered her hand to John, who was impatiently waiting for her at the foot of the landing. After complimenting her profusely on her elegant appearance, he quickly helped her into the wine-velvet cloak which matched her gown and escorted her out the front door and into the awaiting carriage.

The dinner party proved to be quite enjoyable, for everyone was in a festive mood and the mounds of delectable food served buffet-style would have tempted a king. As usual, the Harrisons' mode of hospitality and entertaining was above reproach. Both the Harrison girls flirted outrageously with John throughout the meal, but Jody did not mind, seeing as John so obviously had eyes for no one but herself. His show of attentiveness, which bordered at times on outright possessiveness, somehow gave her an unexpected sense of pride and satisfaction, particularly when she saw the angry, resentful look in Dave's eyes.

Later, as John drove her home in his new carriage, the dreaded moment arrived. Pulling the chestnut mare to a halt, he suddenly turned to her, gathering her in his arms. Before she could protest, his lips covered her own, hesitantly at first, then more possessively. She knew a moment of revulsion as she experienced his increasing ardor and barely suppressed an involuntary shudder as she forced herself to remain still in his embrace.

"Jody, my love," he murmured huskily, "you must know by now how I feel about you."

Words of protest bubbled to her lips, only to be stopped by John who, anticipating her answer, quickly put a detaining finger to her half-opened mouth.

"No, don't say anything—not just yet. I want you, it's true, but I also love you, and I'm sure I could make you happy if you'll just marry me."

"Oh John, you know I'm very fond of you, but I'm not in love with you."

"Few women are ever in love with their husbands until after they're married my dear. It's only when certain inti-

macies are shared that love becomes a reality. Before that, it is, as you say, only a fondness. But you do care for me a little, don't you?"

"Of course I do. But I'm just not sure that we're right for each other," she answered cautiously.

"It's only natural that you have doubts. You're young and untouched and therefore quite innocent in the ways of love. I couldn't love you if you were otherwise. That's why I want you to have this." He pulled a small box from his coat pocket. As he opened it, Jody was unable to think of anything to say. She could only tremble as he slipped a ring on the finger of her left hand. Looking down, she saw that the ring consisted of a single pearl in a beautifully raised setting of gold.

"It's lovely," she murmured uncertainly.

"It first belonged to my great-grandmother, then to my grandmother and, last of all, my mother. I hope that someday it will be passed down to our own daughter," he answered proudly.

He kissed her, gently this time, and though she was not actually repulsed, she felt little, almost nothing at all. With a resigned sigh, she allowed him to go on holding her as they made their way back to Belle Glen. In time, perhaps, she could respond to his lovemaking more readily. She fervently hoped so, for there seemed to be no way of refusing his proposal now, not without deeply hurting his pride. Silently she reasoned that there was no logical reason why she should not marry him. None, other than that she did not love him; she hoped love would come in time. Resting her head on his shoulder, she choked back a sob and quickly brushed a tear from her cheek. For some inexplicable reason she suddenly felt like a trapped animal, doomed to captivity for the rest of her life.

John noticed her gesture and was touched, assuming that she was quite overcome by the honor he had just bestowed upon her. His eyes glittered proudly as they rode the rest of the way to Belle Glen in silence.

Chapter XVI

As Jody had anticipated, spending Christmas at Oakhaven turned out to be anything but pleasant. The worst moment of all, however, was when Cheryl opened her gift from Dave. He had selected a lovely blue gown of soft velvet for her, as well as a dainty pair of blue satin slippers to match. Cheryl disgustedly shoved them aside after only a brief glimpse.

"I've never seen a man who had half an ounce of common sense when it comes to selecting an appropriate gift for his wife. I should think it would be quite obvious that I can hardly wear anything like this now, and by the time the baby comes, heaven knows what size gown I'll be wearing," she remarked disagreeably.

Dave merely laughed aside her criticism, but not before Jody had seen the hurt look in his dark eyes. She hoped that the two of them would at least be pleased with the gift she had selected for them. She had decided against giving them separate gifts, for she had no idea what kind of gift would please Dave. After much thought and a lot of searching, she had finally decided on a lovely chime clock for the mantelpiece in the parlor. Cheryl was extremely pleased, exclaiming that it was just what they most needed for their new home. Dave also murmured his thanks, though less profusely.

Later, Cheryl informed Jody that she herself had picked out Jody's gift, a lovely linen tablecloth and matching napkins for her hope chest which, she added lightly, she felt sure her little sister would soon be needing. Dave had never been enthused over this choice, and now a scowl passed over his handsome features.

Jody fingered the material thoughtfully, then said, "It's lovely, Cheryl, and I must say that you couldn't have picked out a more appropriate gift." Searching for the right words and deliberately avoiding Dave's eyes, she added:

"John asked me to become his wife last night, and I—I have accepted."

For a moment there was only stunned silence. Then Dave set his wine glass down on the mantel with such force that the narrow stem snapped, causing both women to turn to him questioningly. Surprise, then dismay, flooded over Jody as she saw the raw pain in his eyes, the unleashed anger which contorted his lips. Cheryl exclaimed over his clumsiness, and ignoring his foreboding expression, rushed over to Jody, all but crushing her in a fierce embrace.

"Honey, I'm so happy for you," she chattered enthusiastically. "John is so handsome, and it's plain to see that he simply adores you. You're a very lucky girl, you know," she added, then dabbed her moist eyes with a handkerchief. Turning back to Dave, she remarked somewhat defiantly, "And you wish her happiness too, don't you, my dear husband?"

"I've always wanted Jody to be happy, but then I'm quite sure she's always known that," he answered solemnly, his smoldering eyes raking over the younger girl's trembling figure.

Later, despite Jody's protest, Dave insisted on driving her home. Realizing that her sister's future was all but settled and that she was no longer a threat to her own personal happiness, Cheryl generously backed her husband's decision.

As the carriage jogged towards Belle Glen, Jody nervously fidgeted with the ties of her cloak, frantically trying

to think of something to say. Dave was not making matters any easier for her as he sat stiffly beside her, a grim look in his handsomely chiseled features. A freezing rain had begun to fall and Jody, huddling closer to her corner of the carriage, pulled the laprobe more tightly around her knees. She sensed that he was well aware of her discomfort, physically and mentally, yet he remained doggedly silent.

Upon reaching Belle Glen, the carriage was brought to an abrupt halt in front of the wide veranda, but before Jody could alight, Dave had caught her arm in a tight grip.

"Stay where you are until I can get around the other side and help you out," he commanded shortly.

Jody nodded bleakly, for she knew better than to argue with him in his present mood. She knew him well enough to recognize his controlled anger for what it was, just as she knew that there was no way she could avoid his wrath much longer. Thinking that he merely intended to help her out of the carriage, she was totally unprepared when he suddenly scooped her up in his powerful arms and, holding her tightly against his broad chest, carried her up the front steps. Once inside the foyer, he gently set her on her feet, but for a moment neither spoke as their eyes locked in silent confrontation.

The servants had retired for the night. She realized that they were totally alone, and a feeling of apprehension swept over her. She was acutely aware of Dave's eyes raking over her as she walked quickly into the parlor and, with shaking hands, proceeded to light one of the lamps and set it on a marble-top table near the fireplace.

"Go upstairs and get out of those wet clothes before you catch pneumonia and then we'll talk."

Jody spun around to face him, anger flashing in her sea-green eyes as she defiantly lifted her small pointed chin.

"There's nothing for us to talk about, Dave. Not anymore there isn't. I *am* going to marry John, and there's nothing you can do to stop me."

"Do? My dear, I have no intention of doing anything,

though I'm sorely tempted to beat some sense into that thick little skull of yours," he replied. "You little fool, do you honestly think that he will ever make you happy? Can't you see that a man like John is incapable of thinking of anyone but himself?"

"I happen to disagree with you. John has always been kind and considerate to me, which is more than you've been. And no matter what you say against him, I know that he—he loves me."

"Like hell he does! He wants you, Jody. You and the security you can offer him. But love—his kind doesn't even know the meaning of the word."

"And you do, I suppose," she retorted angrily.

"Yes, by God, I do!" The last of his control snapped, and he jerked her to him. Passion blazed in his dark eyes as he gazed at her startled up-turned face. Paying no heed to her struggle, he savagely took her mouth, anger and lust driving him wildly on until he had all but crushed the breath out of her rigid body.

At first she frantically sought to free herself of him, but as his lips became gentle, imploring her to respond, an unexpected wave of ecstasy swept over her, rendering her helpless. Instinctively her arms stole around his neck and, pressing closer to him, she began returning his kiss, clinging to him with every ounce of her remaining strength. She was only vaguely aware of his lips leaving hers, for he still continued to hold her tightly to him so that she became acutely conscious of his growing need for her.

"Oh Jody," he groaned, "don't you see that you can't marry him now. Not now, my love."

His words acted as a cold douche and she unconsciously stiffened in his arms. Tears clouded her lovely eyes as she looked up at him and her voice quivered noticeably when she tried to answer.

"But I must marry him, Dave. Especially now," she whispered brokenly.

Dave released her so abruptly that she almost fell. A small gasp escaped her trembling lips as she saw the anger in his face, the glittering coldness of his stare.

"Then perhaps I was mistaken. Can it be that you real-

ly do love him? Or are you just anxious to go to bed with any man? That's what it will amount to, you know. I wonder if you've given any thought to what it will be like—sharing his bed, bearing his children—and all the time knowing that you don't love him. That you can't ever really love him, because—you happen to love me."

"Stop! For the love of God, stop!" she cried out in torment, burying her head in her hands. Silence hung heavily in the semidark room until finally she forced herself to look at him again. "And would I be any worse off with him than with you? Sharing your bed, perhaps, as your mistress?" she remarked bitterly.

"Jody," he murmured, taking a quick step towards her, but before he could reach her she turned and fled out into the hall, then up the long, curving staircase.

Once she had reached the sanctuary of her bedroom, she quickly shut the door and leaned weakly against it. The room was dark except for the flickering illumination coming from the fireplace, its light playing on her pale face as tears coursed down her cheeks. A frightened whimper escaped her lips when she heard the heavy tread of his footsteps coming up the stairs.

There was no key, no way to lock him out, other than bodily thrusting her own weight against her side of the door, which she realized would do little or no good at all. She backed away from the door, her eyes widened with fear, as he kicked it open. With legs planted widely apart, he glared angrily at her, silently defying her to try and escape him. A menacing look contorted his rugged features while his dark gaze raked boldly over her, taking in every detail of her disheveled appearance, from the long dark hair which had become unpinned and now rioted around her small, oval face, to the rain-drenched garment which clung tenaciously to every curve of her alluring body.

"How dare you burst in here!" she gritted, anger replacing fear. "Get out! Get out or I'll scream."

A sardonic grin relaxed his taut expression to a degree as he approached her, completely disregarding her warning.

"By all means scream, if you think it will do any good.

But I warn you, my sweet, it won't," he replied mockingly.

Her jade-green eyes widened with sudden fear when he placed his hands on either side of her head and she saw the cold determination in his eyes, the diabolical smile which played on his lips.

"How I'd like to crush John Dalton out of your stubborn little mind," he murmured, massaging her temples with his thumb, then slowly increasing the pressure until she winced with pain. "But there are other, more pleasurable ways . . ." His voice trailed off meaningfully.

"Let go of me!" she muttered vehemently. "You must be mad!"

An unintelligible oath escaped his lips as he roughly swept her into his arms, forcing her stiff body to bend to his will.

"Not mad, my dear, just determined. John Dalton may someday own you in name, but that will be all. After tonight, you'll never belong to anyone but me, and I'm going to make damned sure of it."

Savagely his mouth covered hers, forcing her lips apart as his tongue darted inside, almost choking her with its swift possession, yet slowly drawing forth the response he sought. He felt her tremble as his hand expertly unbuttoned the front of her bodice, drawing it down to her small waist and past her hips until it slithered to the floor. Her hands weakly pressed against his broad chest, as though making one last futile effort to break free of him, but this only served to excite him all the more, and quickly he forced the chemise down until it, too, fell to the floor.

He felt her stiffen as his hand gently fondled her taut breast; then, he felt her lips softening and responding beneath his own.

"Oh, Dave—Dave—" she murmured incoherently as her arms slowly wound around his neck, "don't you know that I've never belonged to anyone but you, not since the first day we met."

Dave's breathing became ragged as he experienced the sweet fulfillment of her kiss, the softness of her body as

she instinctively pressed closer to him as though she were actually willing him to become a part of her. It was only when he tasted the saltiness of her tears that sanity returned and his mind cleared. For a moment he continued to hold her, then with a low groan he gently set her from him.

Cupping her face in his hands, he looked down at her bewildered face and saw the love in her shimmering eyes, eyes that were silently pleading for him to finish what he had started.

"No, Jody, not this way. Not until you're absolutely sure that there will be no regrets on your part later. You see, my dear, I love you too much to hurt or shame you in any way. When it happens for us, if it ever does, it must be right in your mind, not just my own."

Seeing the tears sliding down her cheeks, he looked away from her, fumbling with the inner pocket of his coat. After a moment, he extracted a small velvet case and, with unsteady hands, silently handed it to her.

Jody quickly brushed away a tear before slowly opening the lid. Inside was a pair of dainty garnet earrings, each fashioned in the shape of a small teardrop. For a second she was at a loss for words, then a smile trembled on her lips.

"Thank you, Dave. They're—they're lovely. And—and they'll just match the pendant you once gave me," she whispered brokenly.

"Merry Christmas, my love." With a hand on either side of her face, Dave tilted her head backwards and gently, lingeringly, kissed her smooth forehead. Then, without saying anything else, he strode out of her room, quietly closing the door behind him.

Chapter XVII

The date for Jody's wedding had been set for the third of June, only three months away. The announcement had come as no surprise to Dave, nor had he tried again to persuade her to change her mind, for he knew that she was determined to marry John as a means of escaping him. As long as there was Cheryl, he had nothing to offer her; he loved her too much to take her as his mistress, though God alone knew how much he wanted her. As long as she remained single, there was always the danger of one or both of them weakening, giving in to their tightly leashed passions and allowing the inevitable to happen. Though he agreed with her decision, it was not easy to accept, especially when it seemed he was constantly being thrown in contact with her.

Though he avoided going to Belle Glen as much as possible, it was impossible for him not to see her at all, for she was still dependent upon him when it came to managing the large plantation. John would be no help at all when it came to supervising the planting in the spring, much less handling the business transactions which took place in the fall when the cotton was baled and sold. Feeling as he did about Jody, it would be impossible for him to continue helping her once she and John were married, so that the hiring of an overseer for Belle Glen was

now a must. He had already interviewed several prospects, but to date had found no one suitable.

The problem was uppermost in his mind on this particular afternoon, and as he and Steve rode into Vicksburg and nudged their horses towards Maude's Saloon, a tired sigh escaped his lips. Steve turned towards him with a grin.

"Lord, it sure feels good to get into town again," he remarked.

"I'll bet it does," Dave chuckled. "The next time you get Emily in the—family way, it might be better if you took a house in town nearer to Doc Blanks."

"Shucks, Emily could probably have had that young'un all by herself, from what Doc says. To hear him tell it, she's just a natural at having babies, though I'd never have known it before the little fella got here. Lord, she wouldn't even let me out of her sight to come into town for fear of the baby coming while I was gone. You can be mighty thankful that Cheryl's not acting like that."

Dave smiled grimly and thought that it was most unlikely she would under the circumstances. It had not taken him long to figure out that the insinuation that Steve had gotten Cheryl pregnant was only maliciousness on Cheryl's part, her petty way of getting back at him in a moment of anger. Still, he had not forgiven her for making the insinuation, nor was he now totally sure that some other man was not responsible for her condition, a fact which rankled him to no small extent. Shrugging off his mounting irritability, he dismounted in front of the saloon and tied his horse to the hitching post.

"Well, it was worth all the trouble, wasn't it, Steve, considering you came out of it with a fine, bouncing boy. By the way, what did you decide to name him?"

"Miles Edward, after my mother's father. It rather pleased her, I think, especially since she's so taken by the little chap," he answered as they made their way over to the crowded bar.

Dave ordered two whiskeys and when they were served handed one to Steve. "Here's to little Miles, and may his life be a long and happy one," he toasted.

"Thanks, Dave," Steve murmured, then took a sip of his drink appreciatively. "By the way, have you decided what you're going to call yours when it arrives?" he grinned.

Dave was saved from thinking up a suitable reply, for at that moment the young man who worked at the newspaper office came bursting through the swinging front doors, clutching a crumpled scrap of paper in his trembling hands.

"It's hit—the panic's hit!" he cried out breathlessly, collapsing against the bar as several men quickly bunched around him. "This just came in from New Orleans," he gasped, indicating the crumpled sheet in his hand. "Cotton's already fallen by almost one-half on the market!"

Pandemonium suddenly broke out all over the crowded room, with men wildly shouting and cursing. One man pulled out a small derringer and quietly put it against his temple, but before he could pull the trigger, Dave knocked it out of his hand and within minutes he was ushered from the saloon by several friends.

"Whew, that was close," Steve sighed, turning back to his drink. "Well, it's here, just like you predicted. Lord, it's sure gonna hit some folks hard."

"Yes," agreed Dave, "but the worst is yet to come, I'm afraid. Don't forget that this has been one of the worst winters in a long time, and unless the weather takes turn for the better, it's not very likely that the crops are going to be any too good this year."

"Well, at least we're fortunate that we had the foresight to sell our last two crops for gold rather than legal tender," remarked Steve. "But in my opinion, that paper money everybody's been so free with isn't going to be worth the paper it's printed on when this is all over."

"It's not worth that now. You can't buy government land with it any more, and folks are beginning to be reluctant to accept it in payment for anything else they sell."

"What do you think about the state banks that the government has been setting up?"

"At the present, not too damn much," Dave replied. "I

wouldn't want to put my money in one of them until they've been proved to be safe."

"That's what I've been thinking too," Steve agreed.

"This country has been in trouble for a long time, but we've just been a little slow in realizing it," Dave remarked. He paused to light his cheroot, then continued. "We've all been living off the fat of the land. Not only have the people been spending money they didn't really have to spend, but our government has been doing the same thing as well. In short, the whole damn country has been living way beyond its means."

"I'm afraid you're right, Dave. Everything has gone sky-high—from foodstuffs to just about everything you can buy. Why, even in New York, unemployment is so bad that they've had actual demonstrations protesting the high rent and ridiculous prices of food. I read an article about it in the *Picayune* just last week."

"Yes, I read that article. The paper said that one mob even broke into the city's flour warehouses and stole supplies," Dave remarked.

"Well, before long we could very well be witnessing the same thing down here, I'm afraid."

"You know, Steve, folks are already getting restless, especially down along the waterfront section. Now that cotton prices have fallen so drastically, a lot of people are going to have a pretty rough time of it."

"What I don't understand, Dave, is why the government is agreeable to such an unfavorable balance of trade with Europe, which is obviously draining this country of her gold supply."

"Unfortunately, we always have to learn from our mistakes. Let's just hope that we haven't learned this particular lesson too late."

"How long do you think this damn thing will last?" Steve asked.

"It's hard to tell. Maybe a year or two, maybe more. If it lasts too long, we're all going to be in the same boat, regardless of whether we've sold our crops for gold or not," was the gloomy reply.

"That's for sure. I figure I've got enough hard cash

stashed away to help me out for the next two or three years, but after that, I'll be in a bind myself."

"Same thing with me, but I'll tell you one thing, Steve. I sure as hell plan to set aside enough to buy stocks and land with, if and when the bottom continues to drop out of the market."

"Say, that's not a bad idea," Steve agreed, looking at his friend thoughtfully.

Dave finished his whiskey, then, glancing around the smoke-filled room, gave an amused chuckle as he spotted Ben Johnson and several other well-known acquaintances still engrossed in their poker game over at a corner table.

"Hell, it'll take more than a depression to break that up," he remarked calling Steve's attention to the intent group in the far corner. "Want to join them?"

"Might as well," Steve responded good-humoredly. "No sense in just standing around here worrying."

Within minutes they were seated at the table and stacking their chips in front of them. Only a few hands had been played when a short, cocky little man walked over and hesitantly asked if he might join in. It was obvious that the fellow was foreign and, judging by his thick brogue, that he had not been in the country very long. He introduced himself as James O'Rourke, otherwise known as Jamie, and soon divulged the information that he had only recently arrived from Ireland. His bright blue eyes fairly twinkled with merriment whenever he spoke, giving him an affable countenance which Dave immediately liked.

During the game, he casually mentioned that his ancestors had originated in Scotland, but that his branch of the clan had "shown the good common sense" to leave Scotland for a much better piece of land in Ireland.

"Well, if you liked Ireland so damn much, what are you doing so far away from it now?" one of the men laughed.

"Alas, me land is played out and I've not been having a good crop for many a year now. So I says to meself, 'Jamie, me lad, 'tis time that ye were starting afresh,' and where in all of God's green earth could be better than

starting afresh in this beautiful land of America, I ask you?"

"Oh, so you've come here to buy some land and start farming?" Dave asked with interest.

"That I have, that I have," stated the little man proudly. "And by this time next year I'll be having a potato crop such as the likes of ye have niver seen!"

Jamie looked bewildered as everyone around the table suddenly roared with laughter. Then he slowly turned red with anger, thinking that his newly acquired friends were making sport of him.

"And may I ask, what is it that's giving ye so much laughter? Surely ye have heard of potatoes!" he shouted above them.

"Of course we have, Jamie," Dave assured him with as much seriousness as he could muster. "It's just that no one has ever thought of raising them as a main crop. We're mostly farming cotton and sugar cane down here."

"Begorra, man, but of course you can raise potatoes down here. Why, with lovely soil like you have, a man could raise most anything he set his mind to."

"That's true. Do you have any particular land in mind?" asked one of the men.

"Well, no," said Jamie slowly. Then he added, "But as soon as I have acquired the necessary amount of capital, I will be looking for me land. Would ye be knowing if there be any land for sale around these parts?"

"How much did you have in mind?" Dave asked, liking the spunky little man more and more.

"Oh—forty, maybe even fifty whole acres!" Jamie responded proudly.

Dave and his friends suppressed their mirth this time, for none of them wished to hurt the little fellow's feelings again. It was so obvious that Jamie was eager to make a good start in his newly found country and, after all, in a small country such as Ireland fifty acres probably did seem like a great deal of land.

It did not take long for Dave to discover that Jamie was not a very good poker player, for his expressive face

betrayed the type of hand he was holding each time the cards were dealt. Sensing that the Irishman was losing a great deal of his small life's savings, he quickly decided to put an end to it before any more was lost. Getting to his feet, he stretched, then asked Jamie if he would like to accompany him outside for a breath of fresh air.

A look of relief passed over Jamie's face. "That would be suiting me just fine, my friend."

As the two of them walked along the boardwalk, a plan suddenly formed in Dave's mind, one which he felt could help Jamie acquire his land and at the same time solve his own problem of hiring a suitable overseer for Belle Glen.

"Just how had you planned on earning the money to buy your land?" Dave asked unexpectedly.

"Well," laughed the Irishman, "I'm thinking it won't be by taking a chance on me poker playing!"

"No, I wouldn't think so," Dave chuckled. "You say that you've farmed a lot, Jamie?"

"That I have. Why, farming has been me whole life."

"But you've never planted cotton or cane?"

"No, Mister Devan, but I'm thinking I'll be learning soon, and then I'll be planting a little of both—not to be forgetting my potatoes, of course," he added stubbornly.

"Of course," Dave replied with mock seriousness. "Well, now, Jamie—I just might have a proposition that might be of interest to you."

"Oh—and what might that be, Mister Devan?"

"At the present, I'm caught in the predicament of having to run two big plantations, one being my own and the other belonging to my sister-in-law. They're situated right next to each other, but it's still more than I can handle."

"I can see how that would be true," Jamie agreed sympathetically. "And how much land do ye have to manage?"

"Combining the two places, I'd say about nine or ten thousand acres."

Jamie let out a soft whistle. "Does everyone have so much land then?"

"Some folks have even more, and some, of course,

have less," Dave answered, realizing that Jamie must be feeling a little embarrassed over his boastful remark of someday owning a whole fifty acres. "Look, Jamie, how would you like to come to work for me, or rather for my sister-in-law, Miss Alan? She's been needing a full-time overseer for Belle Glen ever since her father died a few years back, and I'm betting that you'd make her a damn good one."

Astonishment was clearly etched on Jamie's ruddy face, but before he had time to answer, Dave continued. "As for that land you want to buy—I believe Miss Alan would agree to let you have fifty acres of your own land as a part of your wages, with the understanding that you would oversee Belle Glen until it's paid off. I'm sure that the details could be worked out with her and they would be quite satisfactory."

"Begorra, man! Would ye be meaning to say that the fair lass would be letting me have me own land right now, instead of making me wait until I could be paying her the full amount?" Jamie asked incredulously.

"I'm almost sure she would, and in addition, you'd probably be paid a small salary each month. Of course, a certain amount of what you'd normally be paid would have to be held out to go on the payment for your land, but you still should be able to get by quite nicely. There's an overseer's cottage ready and waiting for you—unless you would rather build a house on your own tract of land."

"No, I'd not be wanting to waste an inch of me precious soil just for a house, leastways not if there's one already provided for me to use."

"Well then, it's settled, or it soon will be. I'll ride over to Belle Glen and talk it over with Miss Alan first thing in the morning, then let you know of her decision. Where can I reach you?"

"At Mrs. Brown's rooming house," Jamie answered, grabbing Dave's big hand in his two rough ones and vigorously shaking it. "Many thanks to ye, Mister Devan. Ye won't be regretting the trust ye've put in me. Why, I'll be

having that land sproutin' things it's niver sprouted before!"

"I'm sure you will, Jamie," Dave remarked amusedly.
"I'm quite sure that you will!"

Chapter XVIII

By May Cheryl's condition was visibly showing despite the effort she put forth every morning to lace her corset as tightly as possible. She had come to the point where there simply was no way she could disguise her pregnancy any longer, a fact which did nothing to improve her disposition. Nor was she in the proper frame of mind to receive visitors.

Now, standing before her long oval mirror, Cheryl was bitterly regretting her one moment of weakness nine months ago when she had unknowingly allowed Dave to get her into her present predicament. It was just like him, she thought angrily, to invite Steve and Emily over to supper tonight, despite the fact that he knew she was in no mood to entertain.

The laughter which drifted up from the first floor announced the arrival of her guests and, with one last look at her distorted reflection, she turned and walked to the door. As she slowly descended the stairs, she caught sight of Emily, who was tidying her hair before the hall mirror. Envious of Emily's petite figure, she found it all she could do to smile as the younger girl came eagerly towards her.

"Why, Cheryl, honey—how wonderful to see you again! It was so nice of Dave to ask us to supper tonight.

I declare, I've hardly set foot outside the house since little Miles was born," Emily twittered.

"We were pleased that you could come, Emily. My, but you're looking quite recovered," Cheryl returned coolly.

Emily giggled and replied, "I don't mind telling you, my dear, that there were times I didn't think I would ever look nice again! But it all passes, you know. You'll see," she added, giving Cheryl's hand a sympathetic squeeze.

Cheryl abruptly withdrew her hand and said, "Shall we join the men in the parlor? I'm afraid Doshe is a little late with supper tonight."

"Naw'm, ah isn't late wid nuttin', Miz Cheryl," Doshe informed them as she bustled into the room. "Eb'rything am ready an' waitin' on de table. How is yo' doin', Miz Emily? Mah, mah, don' yo' luk jes' fine!"

Thoroughly peeved by now, Cheryl swished into the dining room without waiting for Dave and her guests to follow. Emily did look nice, while she—Cheryl Devan—looked like pure hell! It was too much for her vanity to bear. If only the baby would come and she could be done with the whole miserable affair.

The supper was a typically southern one, consisting of heaping platters of fried chicken browned to a golden crisp, cream potatoes and thick milk gravy, lady peas seasoned with rich hunks of fatback, tender ears of sweet corn, buttermilk cornbread and tiny, flaky biscuits. The finishing touch was Doshe's special deep-dish apple pie.

Everyone seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the meal—everyone but Cheryl, who had suddenly begun to experience a dull ache in the lower part of her back. As the pain increased, it slowly crept around to her swollen middle. She had felt extremely well all day, experiencing an unusual amount of energy. "Of all times, why on earth do I have to be bothered with a backache now," she thought.

Trying not to wince, she attempted to listen to the conversation at hand. What were they talking about, she wondered dismally. Oh, yes—something about that silly depression. Suddenly a sharp pain struck again at her middle and a cry was torn from her clenched lips.

The discussion came to an abrupt halt, and everyone looked at her with surprised concern.

"What's wrong, Cheryl?" Dave asked sharply.

"I—I'm not sure. Perhaps you had better get the doctor, Dave," she managed to get out as the pain subsided a little.

Dave quickly rose and came over to her. Without a word, he swept her heavy body into his arms and carried her up to her bedroom. Laying her carefully on the bed, he informed her calmly that he would send Doshe to look after her until the doctor arrived. Hurt by his apparent coldness, as well as frightened, she began to cry as she watched him leave the room.

By the time Dave got downstairs, he found that Steve had already sent Emily home in their carriage. After briefly discussing the situation, Steve offered to ride into town and fetch Doc Blanks.

"No, I'll go," Dave replied frowningly. "Under the circumstances, I doubt that she'll be wanting me up there anyway."

"Don't be a fool, Dave," Steve snorted. "At a time like this a wife always wants her husband nearby. Oh, I'm not blind—I know you two haven't been exactly hitting it off for some time. But I'll tell you this, Dave, whether you realize it or not, Cheryl loves you one helluva lot!"

After Steve had left, Dave stood in the middle of the hall and slowly digested what Steve had said. Perhaps Cheryl did love him in her own peculiar way and perhaps he was to blame for most of their differences; but how could he have behaved towards her any differently, loving Jody as he did? Had it not been for Jody, things might have turned out better for them, maybe—

Cheryl's shrill scream from upstairs quickly brought him back to the situation at hand. He decided there would be time enough later on for him to rectify his past mistakes. Right now, *his* child was being born, and that was what counted the most. Suddenly feeling as though a heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders, Dave bounded up the stairs two at a time.

Cheryl's labor would not have been as difficult had she

not already been so distraught, but the more hysterical she became, the harder the pains gripped her. By the time Dave reached her side, she was in excruciating pain.

Grabbing his hand, she screamed in terror. "Dave, don't leave me. Please don't leave me!"

"I won't, Cheryl," he assured her as he sat down on the edge of the bed. "I'll be with you as long as you want me."

"I'll always want you," she sobbed, "even though you've never loved me. Not like you love Jody. I—I shouldn't have taken you away from her," she moaned, writhing in agony.

Dave was temporarily stunned. He thought he had so carefully concealed his feelings for Jody, but now he realized that Cheryl had known all along. This, then, was the reason for Cheryl's bitterness towards him. A sense of guilt threatened to overwhelm him as he gently pushed the damp hair from her pale face.

"Cheryl, listen to me for a moment. I know things haven't gone well for us and that most of it has been my fault, but after this is over, I promise you everything will be different."

"Oh Dave, don't you think I know you never wanted to marry me? That you wouldn't have married me had I not been pregnant. And I was so glad when I lost the baby. Glad it wouldn't ever have to know that its mother was a nameless—" she stopped, turning away from him.

"When did you find out about your mother, Cheryl?" Dave asked quietly.

"Just before I lost the baby. She came to see me, and I had to give her money so she would go away and leave me alone. She was horrible and I hated her. I hated my own mother! I was so frightened that she'd let you know—that she'd let everybody know," Cheryl sobbed pitifully.

Suddenly she forgot her pain and looked at Dave with surprise. "You knew—you knew about my mother all along!" she exclaimed.

"Yes. Lettie told me all about her before we were married."

"And you *still* wanted to marry me, knowing that I was illegitimate?"

"Of course I did," came the tender reply. "With my own family background, did you really think that such a thing, for which you were not even to blame, could possibly make any difference to me?"

Cheryl looked at him closely and saw that he was quite serious. "Oh Dave, I don't know—if only I could believe you. If only I could believe that you married me because you really did love me."

"Then try to believe it, my love," he murmured, taking her hand in his own and gently kissing it. "It seems that we've never really understood each other in all the time we've been married, but I promise that I'll make it up to you, Cheryl."

"Oh Dave, I do love you so much, and Dave—" she hesitated uncertainly. "Dave, I lied to you about the baby because I was hurt and angry. I've never given myself to anyone but you. I couldn't, because I love you so much," she confessed as tears streamed down her face.

"I know, my dear. Let's forget about it, shall we," he murmured, and noticed that she was gripping his hand tighter now.

"Oh—oh, it hurts so much. I—I'm afraid, Dave. I want this baby. I want it so desperately. Nothing can go wrong this time, it just mustn't," she sobbed, writhing against the new onslaught of pain.

Doshe, who had been standing by the window and watching for the doctor, turned and shuffled over to the bed.

"Hush now, Miz Cheryl. Yo' ain' gwine ter lose dis heah baby. Jes' try an' relax uh mite, an' let dat baby do de rest. Ain' nuttin' mo' nat'rul den habin' uh baby, so dey ain' no cause fer yo' ter fret so. Yo' jes' makin' hit hard on yo'sef," she admonished, wiping Cheryl's forehead with a damp cloth.

The heat was stifling and lightning in the distance clearly indicated that a thunderstorm was in the making. Dave silently prayed that Steve and the doctor would reach Belle Glen before it broke.

Moments later, Cheryl's pains quickened and Doshe asked Dave to fetch her some hot water and clean towels, then suggested that he wait downstairs for a spell.

"Meanwhile, ah's agwine ter put dis heah knife under de mattress to cut Miss Cheryl's pain wif."

It was an old superstition, but Dave was in no mood to argue. Reluctant as he was to leave Cheryl's side, he could no longer stand to see her in so much pain and, seeing that she was only semiconscious now, he decided to follow Doshe's advice. Fear gripped him as he wondered if there might be complications, complications which would endanger Cheryl's life as well as that of the baby.

He was standing by the parlor window, watching the rain come down in a steady torrent, when he suddenly heard the thin wail of an infant. As he got to the foot of the stairs, Doshe appeared at the top of the landing.

"Hit's all right, Mist' Dave. Yo' am got yo'sef uh fine baby boy!"

"And Miss Cheryl?" he somehow managed to get out.

"She's jes fine, 'cept fer being plum tuckered out!"

By the time he reached Cheryl's bedside, he found her sound asleep from exhaustion. Looking at her, he solemnly swore that he would be a devoted, if not actually loving, husband from this time on; that he would somehow learn to lock Jody out of his mind, even if he could never lock her out of his heart.

By the time Doc Blanks and Steve arrived, they found Dave resting his head on Cheryl's arm, fast asleep. Doshe was in the far corner of the room rocking the new infant and crooning a soft lullaby.

"Well, for the first baby—that was mighty damn fast," Doc remarked briskly. "But I 'spect this little Devan is going to make it just fine, just fine."

Chapter XIX

The depression deepened, forcing most banks to suspend specie payments, and even British bankers began calling in loans when it became apparent that the country was headed for financial disaster. Sale of public lands had almost come to a halt and, to make matters worse, inclement weather made it a certainty that crops would not be good. Businesses facing bankruptcy were closed so that scores of people suddenly found themselves jobless.

As the months dragged on, strong resentments were aroused in the more undesirable part of town. The only sawmill in the Vicksburg area had been forced to shut down, thus laying off workers who depended on the mill for their livelihoods. Folks living near the wharves were finding jobs scarce also, and with food prices so unreasonably high, many were even going hungry.

Vandalism soon reached an all-time high; seldom a night went by that someone's shop was not looted for money, food, clothing and other necessary articles. Even plantations were sometimes plundered, the thieves taking chickens, eggs, vegetables or whatever else they could cart away. And, not content with just stealing, the thieves usually left a path of destruction behind, burning shops, barns and crops of the victims they had plundered. Tempers flared as lawlessness grew, yet no relief was in sight.

Maude's Saloon was the usual meeting place for the more unsavory characters who resided along the waterfront. It was on a hot, sultry June night that the small untidy room became packed with mill and dock workers and a meeting was spontaneously held.

The air was stifling and flies swarmed over the disgruntled men watching a tall, heavy-set man by the name of Tom Callahan stalk up to the front of the room and bang on a nearby table. Tom was, or had been, a mill worker, and was generally regarded as a leader. As he cleared his throat to speak, a hush fell across the room.

"Men, you've asked me to git up here and say a few words about this here problem that's facing us. Well, I don't reckon I got any words of wisdom that's going to change that problem, 'cept that I think if'n we put our heads together we can most likely lick it."

Murmurs sounded across the room as he paused and several men nodded their agreement.

"Now, it ain't very likely that the mill will open any time soon. Mr. Morgan says he's plumb broke, which is most likely the God's truth. So it seems to me like we all got to find another way to put food in our bellies."

"But how, Big Tom? None of us never learned about anything but milling. So how kin we find another way?" asked a dirty little man in the back.

"I'm plumb glad you asked me that there question, Jim. They's only two kinds of folks makin' out these days. Them rich sons-of-bitches who's been hoarding all that gold, and them other fellers who's been helpin' themselves to whatever they could git their hands on. Now we sure as hell don't have none of that gold stashed away, do we!" Tom snorted with a grin.

The men laughed mirthlessly and waited for Tom to continue, knowing in advance that he was going to say what they all had been thinking.

"So it appears to me that we ain't got no other choice 'ceptin' to go out and take what we needs, jest like a lot of other folks are doing," he concluded.

"Big Tom's right—that's the only thing left for us to do. Our families is gotta eat jest like them high and

mighty rich folks," one man shouted excitedly, to which the others loudly agreed.

"Well, who've you picked out for us to loot?" asked another.

Tom hesitated for a moment, then in a loud and clear voice replied, "It strikes me that the all-mighty Devans might be able to spare a mite!"

"I reckon that's as good a place as any to start," someone agreed.

Others enthusiastically voiced their approval. It was no secret that Tom had harbored a grudge against Dave ever since Dave beat him in a fistfight a few months back. The fight had occurred on one of the rare occasions when Dave had visited Maude's Saloon. Tom was drunk and had begun to paw at Maude's daughter, Lottie, while she was trying to wait on tables. Seeing that the young girl was annoyed, Dave had intervened and a bloody fight had quickly followed. Tom never forgot or forgave the incident, so now he was eager to enjoy his moment of revenge.

But if Tom had not forgotten, neither had Maude, who, at the time, had greatly appreciated Dave's intervention. Handing her apron to the bartender, she silently left the room and went into the back of the saloon. Snatching up the first piece of paper she could find, she hurriedly scribbled a note on it, then carefully folding it and tucking it into the top of her bodice she went out the back. With hurried steps she made her way over to the livery stables, where she found the owner's young son, Willie. She knew that Dave had always generously tipped the boy whenever he left his stallion with him while he visited the saloon. He had thus made a true friend of Willie, and Maude knew she could trust the boy.

Briefly explaining the situation, Maude finished by offering Willie a whole ten cents if he would deliver her message to Dave.

"Shucks, Miss Maude, I'd be proud to do hit fer nothin'. If'n Mr. Dave's in trouble, I sure 'nough wants ta help him," the young boy said proudly.

So Willie rode as hard as he could for Oakhaven know-

ing that the mob of angry mill workers would be only a few minutes behind him.

"Mr. Dave, dey's uh boy out heah dat sez he wants ter see yo'," drawled Doshe as she poked her head in the parlor door.

"Who is it, Doshe?" asked Cheryl, rocking her month-old baby, whom they had decided to call Brian.

"Ah don' knows, Miz Cheryl, but 'pears ter me lak he's jes' sum po 'w'ite trash," grumbled Doshe.

"Who on earth could be calling at this hour, Dave? Why, it's almost ten o'clock!" complained Cheryl.

"I have no idea, my dear, but I had better go see."

Dave found the boy standing in the kitchen and recognized him immediately. "Hello, Willie—what brings you way out here at this hour?"

"Miss Maude sent me, Mr. Devan. She give me this—here note to give to you," he answered excitedly.

Dave took the note and read it through a second time before he carefully folded it and tucked it away in his vest pocket.

"Miss Maude said dem mill workers wuz plenty riled up, so I'll be glad to stay on here, if'n you'll let me. I'm a pretty fair shot with a rifle, Mr. Devan," Willie said hopefully.

"No, that won't be necessary, Willie. I don't think there's going to be any trouble, or I'd take you up on that offer," replied Dave tactfully. "Besides, I want you to ride back to Miss Maude just as fast as you can and let her know that I got her note. She might be worried about you if you stayed here."

"Well," said Willie slowly, "I guess she will be worried until I gits back and tells her you got the note."

"That's right, son," said Dave, ruffling the boy's tousled hair.

"Is there anything else I kin do before I leave, Mr. Devan?"

"No. Just tell Miss Maude that I'm mighty obliged for her help," Dave replied. "Here's a little something for your trouble, Willie." Dave extracted a gold piece from

his pocket. "I appreciate your coming all the way out here to help me, son."

"Aw . . . I cain't take that, Mr. Devan. Why, you're my friend, an' friends don't take nothin' for a little favor," Willie replied, wistfully looking at the gold piece. It was more money than he had ever had at one time, and he was struggling against temptation.

"I know we're friends, Willie, but I'd be obliged if you'd accept it just the same," Dave said, putting the coin in the boy's grimy hand. "Be sure that you take the back road going home. It takes a little longer, but you won't run into the mill workers that way."

"Yes sir," Willie answered with a broad grin as he skipped out the back door. "Good luck, sir," he called over his shoulder.

Dave walked out onto the veranda as soon as he heard the sound of approaching horses. While he had been watching through the front window for the mill workers, a plan had begun to take shape in his mind. By the time they arrived, Dave was well prepared for them. He only hoped that his newly formulated idea would appeal to the angry group.

As the men saw Dave appear, they quickly reined in their mounts.

"Howdy, boys," drawled Dave as he leaned with ease against one of the big columns that supported the veranda. Lighting a cheroot, he asked nonchalantly, "What brings you all way out here tonight?"

Everyone looked at Tom and waited for him to speak. Tom, however, had not come prepared for this kind of reception, and he was at a loss as to what he should do next. Finding his voice, he gruffly said: "This ain't no social call, Devan!"

"No, I didn't figure it was," Dave answered evenly, "but I'm glad you're here at any rate. It saves me from having to ride into town to see you tomorrow."

The men's earlier animosity was suddenly displaced by sheer bewilderment. Tom Callaway tried to grasp the situation, but it somehow eluded him. He was sure Devan

had not known of the planned raid, yet there he stood—as if he had actually been waiting on them. He even seemed genuinely glad to see them!

"You wuz comin' to see *us* tomorrow?" asked one man in the background.

"What fer?" asked still another.

"Well now, if you gentlemen will remove those ridiculous kerchiefs from your faces and come on in, I'll be glad to tell you. Mosquitos are too bad for us to discuss anything out here," said Dave, slapping one off his arm.

Reluctantly the men removed their masks, dismounted and walked to the veranda. Cheryl and Doshe leaned over the upstairs banister and anxiously watched them shuffle through the hall to the study.

Once inside the study, Dave carefully shut the massive oak door and turned to his "guests," who were standing there awkwardly, in awe of his self-confidence.

"Please be seated, gentlemen," said Dave as he walked over to his desk and casually leaned against it. "Now it appears to me that you men have been having a pretty hard time of it ever since the mill shut down."

The men grunted their agreement and began to feel more at ease.

"How many of you have any other means of income?" asked Dave.

None raised their hands, but all looked around at one another.

"Are any of you able to do any other kind of work? Have you ever worked at anything else, I mean?" Dave questioned further.

A desolate hush spread over the room as the mill workers bowed their heads with shame.

"Well, it seems to me we're just going to have to reopen the mill then," Dave said with finality.

The men quickly looked at him in astonishment. Here was a man who did not even know most of them, but who was apparently concerned with their problems. It was too incredible for them to understand, much less believe.

"But how, Mr. Devan?" asked Tom anxiously. Then he added, "Mr. Morgan ain't got the money to keep it open,

and folks says he cain't find no buyer. Besides that, there ain't no one to take charge of the workers since ole Charlie up and quit."

Charlie had been the mill worker in charge of supervising the men, and this was the one problem that perplexed Dave. He had enough hard cash on hand to take care of at least a partial payment on the mill. He also felt that an agreeable long-term payment could be worked out with Fred Morgan, who was eager to sell the mill. But the problem of finding someone who could take charge of supervising the mill had Dave completely stumped. Had it not been for this, Dave would have bought the mill weeks ago when it was first put up for sale.

"That's where the problem is—we've got to find a man who knows enough about the mill to take over the supervising of it," Dave stated.

"Big Tom could do it," shouted one man in the foreground. Everyone loudly agreed, except Big Tom. He only ducked his head in embarrassment.

"What about it, Tom? Do you think you know enough to be able to run a mill?" Dave asked him.

"Well, I reckon I'd be willing to give it a helluva try, if'n Mr. Morgan could find a buyer."

"He's found one," Dave stated bluntly.

"You don't mean *you* aim to buy the mill, Mr. Devan?" Tom asked.

"I do. In fact, I'll ride over to see Mr. Morgan tomorrow. If we can reach an agreement, the mill will be reopened within the week," Dave answered seriously.

"But why? You ain't no mill man, and with money so scarce right now, you'd be takin' a chance on losin' your shirt!" Tom exclaimed in amazement.

"With men like you working for me, I don't think I'd be taking a chance at all. If anyone can get a mill back on its feet, I think this bunch can. Besides—if we do put it back in order, I stand to make a very nice profit in the long run. I think it's a damn good investment!" Dave answered enthusiastically.

As the men rose to leave, they saw Dave in a new light of grateful admiration. Tom spoke for the whole group.

"Mr. Devan, you knowed we were up to no good when we came here tonight, but instead of fightin' us like you could've, you're tryin' to help us. We know you don't need no mill at a time like this, but you're right about one thing. After you stickin' your neck out for us like this, we'll sure 'nough try to make it pay off for you. They ain't many folks that's fair like you, and we sure as hell ain't forgittin' it!"

"That's what friends are for, Big Tom. If we all pull together, I think we can make it work," Dave replied.

And work it did, for the men showed a loyalty to Dave that they had never known they could feel. They no longer minded the long working hours and hard labor, because they now had a two-fold purpose. Without the mill, they knew their families would go hungry again, and they also had a favor to repay to their new friend, Dave Devan. They were determined that Dave would never regret his decision to help them by buying the mill. As far as they were concerned, Dave was as close to being a god as any mortal could come, and from that night on, they respected him accordingly.

Chapter XX

As 1838 got underway, the depression appeared to be on the decline, with business activity on the up-take and building towards a second boom. Some, however, feared that this brief spate of relief was only the calm before the storm. Dave Devan was among these and proceeded cautiously, if not a little skeptically. John Dalton, unfortunately, did not.

John and Jody had been married the previous June and, though Cheryl had pleaded with Jody for an elaborate wedding at Oakhaven, Jody had stubbornly insisted on a simple ceremony. The wedding had finally taken place at Belle Glen with only family and close friends in attendance.

The following week, Dave had met with John to give him all the business ledgers he had been keeping on Belle Glen for Jody. He did so reluctantly, believing John to be a bad businessman as well as an irresponsible spend-thrift. John had shown no interest in Belle Glen and had appeared anxious for the meeting to end. Realizing that there was nothing more he could do, Dave had departed with a real sense of foreboding.

His intuition proved to be correct within a very few months. Unable to grasp the country's economic situation, John continued to gamble, spend money lavishly, and

make extremely poor investments. Now that he had acquired Belle Glen through his marriage with Jody, he believed his financial situation to be unshakable. After all, he reasoned, wasn't Belle Glen one of the few large plantations which had prospered even during the decline?

This, among other personal problems, caused Jody much concern. She had valiantly tried to be a good wife to John, even though the intimate part of her wifely duties remained distasteful to her. Her unresponsiveness to his more ardent moments had eventually caused his desire for her to wane, so that once again he became a frequent patron of some of the more undesirable establishments along the waterfront. Jody had guessed as much when his trips into town became more and more frequent, finally ending in his failure to come home at all on many occasions.

Had she loved her husband, she might have been hurt by his negligence. As it was she was relieved, knowing that on the nights he was away she would not be obligated to endure his lusty advances. Never one for hypocrisy, as time went by the lie that she was living became almost unbearable. Sleep did not come easily and dark circles became prominent under her large green eyes. Her clothes hung loosely on her small frame as her appetite diminished to almost nothing.

Whenever John was at home, unpleasantness broke through any pretense at politeness. Jody was worried about the vast sums she knew he was spending. John, on the other hand, felt no sense of guilt in living off Jody's income, and he deeply resented it whenever she questioned his spending habits. Had she reproached him for his nightly trips away from home, he would have welcomed the change. That, at least, would have shown she cared for him, but he knew by now that she did not. True, he had not tried very hard to be a good husband, but he never reproached himself on this account. After all, Jody was not the only woman, he reasoned, and as long as he was provided with ample funds he was totally unconcerned with her feelings towards him. Vanity led him to believe that the day would come when she would welcome his attentions. Then, and only then, would he

consider ending his trips into town. Until that time he did not intend to sacrifice any of his pleasures. That Jody might never find him desirable was inconceivable to him. Never once did he suspect that his wife might be in love with another man. In his eyes, Jody was too pure and innocent, too unimaginative for that type of emotion. In fact, he had begun to think of her as being a very dull and unemotional person.

It was a sultry August afternoon, and Dave had just ridden into town for a little relaxation. As he was about to go into the saloon, he spotted Jamie in a buckboard with Mammy Lou and Uncle Thad seated behind him. Dave waved to him as Jamie drew his team to a halt.

"Top of the mornin' to ye, Mr. Devan," Jamie shouted cheerfully.

"And good morning to you, Jamie," answered Dave, nodding also to Mammy Lou and Uncle Thad. "What brings you into town?"

"Miss Jody sent us into town for provisions and said for us to take the whole afternoon about it," beamed Jamie. "The truth of the matter is that I also have business down at the boat docks."

"Oh, are you planning a trip?" asked Dave.

"That I'll not be doing," Jamie laughed, adding, "Tis looking for the arrival of me good wife, Katherine, and our wee laddie, Bret, that I am!"

Surprised, Dave exclaimed, "Why, I didn't know you had a wife, Jamie!"

"That I do, although I've not seen the lad yet. That's the reason for me Kate not being with me on my trip to this grand and glorious land. She being with child and all, we decided that she should wait until after the birthing and until I could make a fresh start in a new land."

"A wise decision, as I'm sure it's a hard trip for anyone to make. When will they arrive?"

"Most any time now, I'm thinking. I got a letter from me darlin' Kate only a month ago, just before she departed from our beloved homeland to come to this wonderful country. Judging from me own journey, it should

not be much longer, so Miss Jody allows me to come into town every day to meet the boats that dock."

"Oh, I see," Dave replied, his mind wandering involuntarily to Jody.

"I'd not be leaving the lass if it were not so important. I'm not liking the look and feel of the weather today," Jamie remarked as he glanced worriedly at the gloomy sky.

"It looks like we might be in for a bad storm pretty soon, but you shouldn't mind leaving her. Mr. John is at home, isn't he?" asked Dave, who had heard the rumors of John's growing unfaithfulness to his wife.

"That he isn't, Mr. Dave, nor will you usually be finding him there," Jamie snorted disgustedly.

"What do you mean?" Dave questioned. He was growing more uneasy by the minute, noticing the unusual yellow cast beneath the gathering black clouds.

"Good Lord, man! Surely ye know that the man is more often in some saloon than at home where he's belonging!" came the angry exclamation.

"I had heard as much, but I somehow couldn't believe it. They have scarcely been married a year. How is Miss Jody, Jamie?"

"She's not been doing too well, I fear. Not too well at all," he replied with a shake of his head.

Mammy Lou had gotten out of the buckboard and was standing directly behind the overseer. Dave saw the concern on her face as she quickly brushed a tear from her large black cheek.

"Oh, Mist' Dave, ah purely don' knows whut ter do 'bout mah baby! She looks so po'rly, an' ah jes cain' seem ter gits her ter eat nuttin'. Why, mah baby's jes wastin' away, Mist' Dave, plumb wastin' away!"

When he heard this, Dave's face darkened and he had to fight to control his mounting anger. "Well, you go on and enjoy the afternoon. I think I'll drop by and check on her a little later on."

"Oh, bless yo', Mist' Dave, bless yo'!" Mammy Lou wailed gratefully.

"I don't know what good you can be doing her, but

she'll be glad to see you just the same," Jamie added with relief.

Though his throat was parched from the heat, Dave put aside his thought of going into the saloon and, instead, remounted and headed towards Belle Glen.

He knew it would take him almost an hour to get there, and as the sky darkened, his uneasiness grew. He had no misgivings about the safety of Cheryl and his son, Brian. They had gone to visit the Blakes at Roselawn that afternoon and he knew that they would be well taken care of in the event of a storm. Jody, however, was at Belle Glen alone, except for the field hands, who were not permitted in the big house.

The humidity became suffocating as Dave approached the plantation, and a deadly silence sent shivers up his spine. The wind, which had been blowing forcefully out of the north only minutes before, had now completely subsided. A foreboding stillness hung heavily in the sticky air. Dave briefly recalled hearing the slaves chanting mournfully while they worked the fields that morning, and he remembered that he had wondered why they seemed so sorrowful. Now he thought he knew. Negroes were a superstitious lot, but one could not lightly disregard their premonitions. It was uncanny how their predictions often came true, and Dave had long ago learned to pay heed to their warnings.

The low and fast-moving clouds seemed to be churning, closing in, and Dave noticed with alarm one particularly black cloud which was quickly rolling in from the southwest. As he reached the house, the wind began to pick up again. Knowing that his horse would instinctively find shelter, he threw the reins over the saddlehorn and rushed up the veranda steps.

Not bothering to knock, Dave ran into the house. The first floor was completely dark, and at first it seemed that no one was at home. Then he made a dash for the stairs.

The wind had intensified to such a point that he was convinced this was not an ordinary storm, but a tornado! He silently prayed that he would find Jody upstairs and that the funnel would bypass the house.

Calling her name, Dave burst through Jody's bedroom door and found her standing by one of the windows. Fear was mirrored in her green eyes as she jerked around to face him, her long hair falling softly over each shoulder and barely concealing pointed breasts which strained against her flimsy wrapper.

"For God's sake, Jody, get away from that window!" he shouted as he rushed over to her. Pulling her back, he quickly looked for a safe place to go even while his mind told him that it was too late. A terrific roar, accompanied by the shattering of glass, announced the approaching funnel, which suddenly came into plain view. As a fence post was hurled through the window which Jody had been standing by only seconds before, Dave shoved her to the floor and covered her trembling body with his own.

Too stunned to speak, Jody was completely unaware of the weight of Dave's body pressing down on hers as she hid her face against his broad chest. The terror lasted only minutes, yet to both of them it seemed like hours. Their nerves were taut as they listened to the twister sowing its path of destruction. Then, as the roaring slowly subsided, Dave raised his head and looked anxiously down at Jody, who was still trembling violently beneath him.

"Are you all right, Jody?"

"Yes—yes, I think so," she whispered, glancing up to see the concern in his eyes. "Dave—" but she got no further as a wave of emotion stilled her words. His body still pinned her beneath him, and both were acutely aware of her nakedness beneath the thin wrapper she wore. Suddenly Dave began to tremble as his breathing quickened.

Rolling off her, he got shakily to his feet, his eyes never leaving hers as she continued to lie there.

"Get up, Jody," he commanded, abruptly turning away from her, not trusting himself to touch her.

But Jody was past the point of caring about right and wrong, about anything other than the man who stood before her. Crossing over to where he stood, she slowly entwined her arms around his waist and gently nuzzled his

broad back with her cheek. Stiffening with surprise, Dave jerked around to face her.

"For the love of God, Jody—do you know what you're doing? How much more do you think I can take?" he muttered hoarsely, grabbing her roughly by the arms.

"I love you, Dave, and I want you," she whispered tremulously.

"Do you know what you're asking? Are you sure—"

"Oh, yes, yes," she murmured as she swayed against him, her arms encircling his neck.

His lips clamped down on hers, hungrily devouring the sweetness she offered as her lips softly parted beneath his own. He felt her breathing quicken as he loosened the sash at her waist, prising her arms from his neck and forcing them out of their flimsy confinement. Pulling her to him, his hands moved over the soft curves of her smooth body as his lips moved over her eyes, her throat and breasts, then back to her trembling mouth. He felt, rather than saw, her fingers loosening the buttons on his shirt, felt her full breasts against the bareness of his flesh as she pressed herself more closely to him, causing a sweet agonizing pain to shoot through him which could no longer be denied. Swiftly picking her up in his arms, he carried her over to the bed and gently laid her on it.

There was no mistaking the desire in her eyes as she watched him disrobe, though a slow flush spread over her when she saw the extent to which he had been aroused. A sudden shyness made her turn from him when he came over to stand by the bed.

"Don't Jody—don't turn away from me. Look at me, my love—"

Jody did as she was told, her eyes traveling up the length of him, reveling in his maleness, the virility of the body which stood before her, until shyness overcame her and she avoided his gaze. He felt her tremble as he lay down beside her and gently gathered her into his arms.

"What is it, my sweet, what's wrong?" he asked softly against her ear. "You're married—you've seen a man's body before—"

A sob caught in her throat as she turned to face him and lightly placed her hands on his broad chest.

"But I—I haven't. It's always dark when we—" She hesitated, searching for the right words. "I've—I've never looked at him. I *couldn't* when I don't—I don't love him." With a soft cry, she buried her head against his chest. "How could I, when I've never loved anyone but you!"

"But surely he's made love to you?" he gently questioned, but when she nodded that he had, his grip involuntarily tightened on her.

"I—I can hardly bear it whenever he does. It's so painful and so—so degrading," she sobbed with a shudder.

"It won't be this time, my love, I promise you. But first you must get over your shyness with me. Now look at me," he commanded softly.

Slowly Jody obeyed, forcing her gaze downwards until her eyes finally came to rest on his lower extremity. Her breath caught in her throat as he unexpectedly forced her hand down on him, but it was he who trembled violently as her fingers began their gentle exploration, searchingly, slowly moving over him until he could no longer bear it.

"Oh, God, Jody—I want you so much. Not just a part of you—all of you! Are you sure, my sweet? Are you absolutely sure," he muttered hoarsely.

"Yes, Dave—yes," she cried, lifting her face to his as her trembling hands moved upwards to his chest.

His mouth savagely took her quivering lips as he moved on top of her and his hands began expertly caressing the soft curves of her body. A small gasp escaped her lips as his fingers moved lower, deliberately teasing her senses until, half out of her mind with wanting him, she pressed even closer to him, molding her flesh to his.

"Oh, Dave, I love you," she murmured incoherently, her arms tightening around his neck. "I need you so—"

He had intended to take her slowly, gently, so as not to hurt or frighten her, but the wild abandonment of her passion excited him to the point that he could no longer

hold himself in check, and with a quick, deep thrust he entered her.

A cry was torn from her lips as she felt the unexpected pain and stiffened against the sudden invasion of her body. Instinctively she struggled against his hold on her, fear making her tense as she suddenly wondered if she would be able to satisfy the insatiable hunger of the man who was devouring her body with his own. Sensing her fear, Dave forced himself to remain still for a moment, gently pushing her damp hair from her forehead.

"Don't, Jody—don't fight me," he whispered soothingly. "Try to relax, my love—"

The gentleness of his voice reassured her, and as her taut muscles relaxed and she felt the warmth of him inside her, fear gave way to an overwhelming desire for fulfillment, blotting all else from her mind.

As he felt her gradually relax, he began moving, slowly at first, until moments later her movement was matching his own, quickening as she arched her back and dug her fingers into the back of his neck. With one last thrust he heard her cry out, felt her shudder against him as they both simultaneously reached the fulfillment of their love.

Moments after their passion was spent, Jody and Dave lay silently beside each other and listened to the rain tapping on the windowpane. As she snuggled closer to him he felt the wetness of her tears on his chest. Pulling her closer to him, he tipped her head back and forced her to look at him.

"What's wrong, sweetheart? You're not sorry, are you?" he asked with a worried frown.

"No, of course I'm not, Dave. It's just that I—I love you so much, I have no shame for what I've done," came the choked reply.

"What *we* have done, dearest," he corrected. "But isn't it better to give yourself to someone you love rather than to someone you don't?"

"So much better, except that it can't last. You know that as well as I—" She stopped abruptly, shivering at the thought of John.

"If I hadn't been such a fool, none of this would have

happened. I wouldn't be married to Cheryl, and you wouldn't be married to—I don't even like to say his filthy name! But since we are married to them, we'll just have to make the best of it," he whispered as he stroked her hair.

"No, Dave," Jody said quietly. She gently pulled away from him and sat up. "I can't help loving you, nor can I feel ashamed of these few moments we've had together. But it mustn't happen again. Don't you see, we'd only be making matters worse for everyone concerned."

Dave did not argue with her—could not, because he knew she was right. The situation was as hopeless as ever and he, too, realized that they would both have to be satisfied with the precious memory they now shared. Tired and sick at heart, he reluctantly got out of bed and began to dress.

Chapter XXI

The relief experienced by the decline of the depression was enjoyed for only a brief period of time, the major crisis coming in '39 when the Bank of the U. S. closed after unsuccessfully trying to sustain cotton prices. This, along with other bank failures, had stirred up dissatisfaction with state banks as depositories for public funds.

Dave had proceeded cautiously during the previous year, so that his finances were not in any immediate danger. He had bought quite a few shares in the Vicksburg and Jackson Railroad, which was to be completed within the next two or three years. He had also gotten an extremely good price for his cotton crop that same year, which he had insisted be paid to him in gold. His financial affairs were in order, but this unfortunately was not true for John Dalton.

John had been even more extravagant than usual during the previous year and, to make matters worse, he had invested Jody's money from Belle Glen's crops into numerous unsound stocks. When the market declined again everything was lost, and John's creditors were no longer satisfied with his empty promises.

Jody was plagued with worry, realizing that if some answer were not found soon, she would lose Belle Glen. Yet she could not bring herself to ask Dave for help.

Steve heard of her precarious situation and immediately rushed over to inform Dave. He found him in the fields supervising the field hands. After discussing the matter, they agreed that Cheryl should be spared the troublesome news for as long as possible, since Belle Glen meant a great deal to her, too.

"Just how bad is it, Steve?" asked Dave worriedly.

"About as bad as it can be. As usual, John has been spending money like it was water," Steve answered seriously.

"I still can't understand why the damn fool invested Jody's money so stupidly," Dave remarked with a shake of his head.

"God only knows! I imagine it's pretty hard for a man, even a scoundrel like John, to have to ask his wife for money," Steve answered wryly.

"I guess you're right," agreed Dave. They rode on in silence for a few minutes. Finally Dave said, "Look, Steve, I'd like to ask a personal favor of you."

"Just name it, Dave. You know I'll be glad to help in any way that I can."

"The only way Jody can hang on to Belle Glen is if she can pay off John's debts, so I want you to ride over tomorrow and offer to make her a loan. She won't accept charity, so tell her you'll take a mortgage on Belle Glen as her collateral. Meanwhile, go around town and try to find out just how much John owes."

Steve was astonished by Dave's proposal, but before he could say anything, Dave went on to explain.

"Of course I'll finance the whole deal, but no one must know that I'm connected with it in any way."

"But why all the secrecy, Dave? You know I don't mind doing it. In fact, I'd be glad to make the loan myself if money weren't so tight."

"I know you would, Steve, but this is something I want to do myself, and it's got to be done without anyone knowing about it."

"I'm afraid I still don't see why. Surely Jody would appreciate your concern more than mine, since you're a part of her own family. It looks to me like it would be far less

embarrassing for her if you were the one to make the offer."

"Let's just say there's always been a mutual dislike between John and me, and he might not accept my offer. Besides, I think it might bring him to his senses if he realized that the mortgage on Belle Glen had to be paid off within a reasonable amount of time. I don't care about the money—I'd give it to Jody if I thought she would take it. But that wouldn't solve her problem for long, and that's why I think John's heels ought to be held to the fire on this thing. Maybe it'll make him grow up a little. If Jody takes the loan from you, it'll be a simple business transaction. If she accepted it from me, she might feel indebted to me, and that's the one thing I *don't* want," Dave stated emphatically.

"What difference does it make who she feels indebted to? I still think you're making a mistake, Dave. Jody ought to know that you're sticking your neck out for her."

"Let's just say it would be embarrassing to the both of us if she did know," replied Dave, more curtly than he had intended.

As Steve turned his horse towards town, he reflected over their strange conversation. Then the truth of the problem slowly dawned on him, and he chided himself for not realizing it sooner. Steve wondered if Jody knew—if, perhaps, she was even in love with Dave. In short, he began to wonder just how far things had gone between them. A long time ago, Cheryl had been certain that Dave did not love her; he had even tried to assure her that she was wrong. It now seemed that Cheryl had been right all along, and suddenly Steve felt sorry for her. In spite of outward appearances, he now realized that her marriage must have been a very empty one all these years. He felt that it was a rotten trick of fate, at any rate. So much happiness had been lost to all of them.

John was elated when Steve offered a substantial loan in lieu of a mortgage on Belle Glen. Jody, however, was somewhat hesitant, and asked for a little time in which to consider the offer. The facts simply did not fit.

She knew that money was as scarce for Steve as for anyone, and it did not make sense for him to sacrifice his limited resources for a mortgage on Belle Glen. She was quite sure Steve had no desire to own the place, and she was also quite certain that he could not possibly afford to make such a generous loan, not even to help out an old friend. In fact, there was only one man she knew who was in a position to make such a generous loan—Dave Devan.

Wishing to question Steve further on the matter, Jody walked to the veranda with him, after first asking John to bring her fan to her from upstairs. The sweet fragrance of wisteria and magnolias drifted through the warm June air, and a hound bayed mournfully in the far-off distance. It seemed a shame to have to discuss business matters on such a night as this. Nevertheless, there were certain things she had to be sure of before she would accept Steve's generous offer . . . if it *were* his offer!

"Steve, did Dave send you over here to make this loan?" Jody asked hesitantly.

"Whatever gave you that idea, Jody?" Steve laughed uneasily. He had not expected Jody to see through their plan so quickly, and he was at a loss as to how to answer her question.

"You wouldn't tell me even if it were true, would you," she stated with conviction.

"Look, Jody, I've made you an offer that I think is fair and square. If it helps you out of a mess—well, that's what old friends are for. Let's let it go at that, all right?" Steve hedged.

"All right, Steve. I really do appreciate it, you know. I just wish there were some other way," she said sorrowfully.

"Then you'll accept?" asked Steve hopefully.

"I don't know. I'll have to think on it a little. Can you give me until tomorrow?"

"You know I can," replied Steve, patting her hand. "Take all the time you need, Jody."

That night, John, slightly intoxicated, came to Jody's bedroom and tried to persuade her to accept Steve's offer.

"I can't understand why you'd even hesitate, Jody. Surely you must realize our circumstances by now!"

"And who put us in such circumstances, John? Not I and certainly not Steve, so I see no reason why he should make such a sacrifice to help us now," Jody retorted angrily.

Surprised at her animosity, John snapped: "And would you rather lose Belle Glen?"

"You know I wouldn't, but I won't have Dave paying for your mistakes," she replied. Then she realized with horror that she had said Dave, rather than Steve.

John turned to her quickly. "And what the devil does Dave have to do with this, may I ask?"

Tired to death of pretending, Jody sat down on the bed. She looked at her folded hands in order to avoid John's hostile stare. "I think it's Dave and not Steve who is making this offer, John."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. Just what is it that keeps your saintly brother-in-law from making the offer himself, if what you say is true?" he asked as suspicion began to creep into his whisky-soaked mind.

"I don't know," lied Jody, turning her face from him.

"But I think you do, my sweet. I think you know very well!" he sneered, grabbing her chin and jerking it around so that he could see her face. Seeing the answer in her eyes, his anger suddenly erupted violently. With a loud curse, he slapped her across the face with such force that she was almost knocked unconscious. Then, grabbing her by the hair, he yanked her head backwards and bent over her.

"I would have forgiven you anything but this," he roared. "God knows I've been patient with you, but that's over now. You're *my* wife, not Dave Devan's, although only God knows what I'd want with a little trollop like you!" Enjoying her pain, he continued. "Tell me, my loving wife—has your precious Dave taught you how to be more responsive? Has he taught you the art of love-making? I'm curious to know," he sneered, ripping her gown from her trembling body.

Jody was too stunned to move at first; then as her

senses returned, she began to fight him with all her strength. Her desperation drove John to an even higher pitch of excitement. He had never realized that Jody had so much spirit! As his desire for her reached its peak, he became a vicious animal.

Later, after John had finished with her and walked out, Jody lay in a broken heap on the large bed. It was the same bed she had once shared with Dave—but not like this! Nothing could ever happen to her that would be as horrible as this night had been. She could only lie there in agony. Little did she know that during the next few months this scene would be repeated time and again; nor did she realize that on that very night, she had conceived a child. She only knew that she wished, with all her heart, that Dave was beside her now, soothing away her pain as only he could do.

Jody reluctantly accepted Steve's loan and gave him a mortgage on Belle Glen. It hurt her pride to have to do so, especially since she realized that his offer was made purely out of friendship. She still had strong suspicions that Dave was mixed up in it somehow, but she could not bring herself to ask Steve about it again. There was no point in asking him anyway. She knew that John would force her to mortgage the place, if not to Steve, then to someone else. It was the only hope he had of paying off his bad debts.

For the first time in her life, Jody knew what it was to despair over money. She was not able to buy anything in town now unless she paid hard cash; the Daltons' credit was no longer any good. A new carriage was usually bought each year, but this necessity now was considered a luxury. The house had always been repainted in the spring, but that also would have to wait for the time being. There seemed to be no relief in sight, and Jody knew that John would quickly go through whatever amount was left from the loan after his debts were paid.

She was constantly worried about the problem, but unable to do anything about it. Since John had discovered her feelings toward Dave, he had become obsessed with

tormenting her, usually forcing himself on her with such cruelty that she was too ill to get out of bed the next day. The sight of him sickened her now, and the sound of his footsteps made her jump with fright.

The house servants knew what was happening, but they were powerless to stop it. Jody had tried to hide her bruised and swollen face from Mammy Lou the first time he had beaten her, but to no avail. When the old Negro had brought her breakfast tray up to her bedroom, Jody had averted her face in order to try and hide the telltale marks, but Mammy Lou's keen eyes had missed nothing. When she saw Jody's pitiful condition, she had become hysterical.

"Lawd Gawd, Miz Agnus! Whut's dun' hop'pen to mah po' lil' chile? Whut is dat man don' to yo', Miss Jody?" she cried.

"He hasn't done anything to me, Mammy Lou. I—I got up to open the window last night, and I ran into that post," Jody lied, pointing to the post at the end of the bed.

Mammy Lou bent over her and peered closely into her face. "Yo' ain' foolin' me, Miss Jody. Ah ain' nevuh seed no pos' whut has fingers on it," argued the old woman as she gently tilted Jody's face up so she could get a better look at it.

"Yo' been hit! Ah nevuh did lak dat man no how, an' he am flat gwine ter be outta dis heah hous' as soon's ah sen's Thad over ter tell Mist' Dave 'bout dis," fussed the old woman.

"No—you mustn't! I absolutely forbid it!" Jody cried, sitting up quickly.

"But chile, sum'body is gots ter he'p yo'. Dat man ain' rat in de haid!"

"You're not to mention this to anyone, and especially not to Mr. Dave. Do you understand?"

"Yas'm—but a sho' don' un'erstan's hit," Mammy grumbled.

"Well, you don't have to understand it. Just do as you're told," Jody snapped peevishly. "You don't need to worry about me. There's nothing wrong that can't be

worked out in time. It'll be all right, Mammy Lou," she added more kindly.

"Ah sho' duz hop's so fer yo' sake, honey," she replied, gently pushing Jody back against the pillows.

Long after Mammy Lou had left the room, Jody lay there thinking of Dave. She knew that he was struggling to make his marriage with Cheryl work, just as she had struggled to make her own work. She hoped that he, at least, would succeed in his effort, since the past few hours had shown her that she could not. Whatever small chance at happiness she and John had had was now destroyed. The outward bruises would soon heal, but the invisible ones would always be there. Still, she could not entirely put the blame on John. He had given her his name and his love in good faith, whereas she had been able to give him nothing in return. Whatever the consequences, she had chosen her path, and she knew that she must walk it alone.

It did not take long for Jody to strike up a warm friendship with Jamie's wife. A large, buxom woman, Kate O'Rourke was not actually pretty, but her dark hair and eyes gave her a striking appearance. Though her peasant background was often apparent, her quick sense of humor sometimes bordering on ribaldry, whatever she lacked in the social graces was more than compensated for by her happy disposition. She was one of those rare individuals who actually loved everything about living, a feeling which was always spread to those who came in contact with her.

It was only natural for Jody, in her loneliness, to spend more and more time visiting the little cottage which Kate took pains to keep spotless. She took great pleasure in tending to little Bret on Kate's busier days, rocking him or bouncing him on her knee until he chuckled with delight. On these happy occasions she sometimes found herself wishing that she and John might someday have such a fine boy, though she doubted that it would be possible to conceive such a happy child when there was no love in the marriage itself.

Though Kate suspected that something was amiss in the younger girl's marriage, she wisely avoided prying into the subject, nor did Jody ever mention her personal problems to Kate. It was enough that they had formed a strong bond of friendship and understanding, and Jody eventually came to feel more at home in the little cottage than she did in her own home.

She particularly enjoyed the afternoons when Jamie was able to come home early, for then the family picture was complete. It was not unusual for the couple to get into a loud argument, but always in a good-natured manner, the outcome often being so comical that Jody was quickly doubled-up in laughter. In short, it was a happy home, and Jody was pleased to feel that she was a part of it.

It was on one of these pleasant occasions that Dave came by to check with Jamie on Belle Glen. Jody had not known that he was still taking an interest in the place, nor was Dave aware that Jody was spending a great deal of time at the O'Rourkes'. It was, therefore, an unexpected shock for both of them when Kate warmly greeted Dave at the front door and ushered him into the room.

For a moment neither could think of anything to say, but merely stared at the other in surprise. To lighten the awkward silence which followed, Kate and Jamie went into one of their jovial arguments. Within a few minutes the tension was eased. It was not until a cup of Kate's tea had been served to all that Dave approached the subject foremost in his mind and asked Jamie if he had noticed any unusual behavior among the field hands lately.

"It seems that some are sullen and not very willing to work," he replied thoughtfully, "but only a few."

"Hmmm—the same thing happened back in '33 when Jody's father was killed. It wasn't exactly an all-out rebellion, but a handful of troublesome slaves did manage to stir up quite a bit of hell around here nevertheless," remarked Dave, then immediately regretted his words as he saw Jody shiver.

"And you're thinking that the same thing might happen again?" questioned Jamie. "Well, it could at that, I sup-

pose. As I said, some of them do seem to be getting more and more sullen."

"Dave, do you really think there might be trouble?" Jody asked.

"I don't know, Jody, but something must be in their craw. You can almost feel the tension in the air. It's as if they're all waiting and watching for something to happen, but I can't figure out just what," he replied.

"Aye, that you can, me boy. I've felt it meself of late," Jamie agreed.

"But can't we do something before it gets started this time?" asked Jody in a worried voice.

"And what might that be, me fine lassie? Ye cannot be reasoning with dumb animals," Jamie asserted.

"But they're not animals, Jamie. That's the tragic part about this whole damn business," Dave said thoughtfully.

"Well, they're not the same as the rest of us! I've yet to be finding a single one who has a sensible thought in his head," Jamie retorted hotly.

"How do any of us really know what thoughts they have? How many of us have even tried to understand their feelings? Damn few!" Dave argued. "They're men, just like the rest of us. The only difference is that the Almighty chose to make them a shade darker than us. I hardly think that he loves them any the less for it though."

By now, Jamie's face had turned scarlet with rage. "How can ye be comparing us to those black heatherns!"

"I'm not trying to compare us to anybody. I'm simply stating facts. The good Lord made not one but three races—each completely different from the other in physical appearance. No one knows why he went to such great lengths, when obviously it would have been much simpler for him to make just one race. Nevertheless, he did—and I figure he must have had a pretty good reason for doing so."

"I still say they're not much more than animals. Why, look at the way they live, man! They're savages, with all their voodoo and pagan beliefs. Most of them are too dumb to even speak the good King's English so as you

can understand it. They haven't the good sense God gave a goose, and I've yet to be meeting the one who doesn't have to be told what to do, how to do it, and when to do it!" expounded Jamie.

Jody was rocking little Bret, who had drifted off to sleep. She tiptoed across the room and gently tucked him into his bed, then quietly returned to her chair. She firmly agreed with Dave and she was proud of him for voicing his convictions.

"Jamie, you call them savages, and maybe they are, at least for the present. But have you ever stopped to think what our own people were like several thousands of years ago? Obviously we weren't civilized then, and I doubt seriously that white people were any less the savages that these poor black devils are now. As a matter of fact, it's taken us a hell of a long time to become civilized—if you could call us that even now."

Jamie was completely amazed. For a white man to voice such thoughts was unheard of, and in Jamie's baffled mind downright sacrilegious. "Surely, man, you can't be saying they're as good as us! Would you have your own good son be marrying up with the likes of one of them someday?"

"Of course not, nor do I think it's God's intention for any man to marry outside of his own race. If that ever became socially acceptable, eventually there would be only one race, and a degenerate race at that. When you crossbreed livestock, you lose the purity of the strain, and the same thing holds true of people, I imagine. I frankly don't believe that was what God had in mind at all, or else He surely wouldn't have gone to such lengths for diversity. In fact, I think it goes against the very laws of nature to intermix races, and I certainly don't think any good will ever come out of interracial breeding for anyone. But I still say that Negroes are human beings and should be treated as such. It's not their fault that they're black, nor that their people have gotten a rather late start towards becoming civilized," Dave finished.

"But the black race is just as old as the white race—or almost, anyway. So if they're as good as white people,

why haven't they become civilized by now? I'll tell ye why, me boy—because they're an inferior race," Jamie argued.

"Not necessarily. It apparently just wasn't God's will that we all become civilized simultaneously. Who knows why? I daresay it won't take the Negroes as long to progress as it took our race, because they have one thing in their favor that we didn't."

"And what might that be, Mr. Devan?" Jamie asked sarcastically.

"The benefit of our hard-earned knowledge. Fortunately, they have the opportunity to learn from our way of life, whereas we had no ready-made civilization from which to learn."

By this time, Jamie had begun to calm down a little. There was some truth in what Dave was saying, he had to admit; in any case, it was certainly something to consider. But he was still somewhat confused by his friend's attitude. "Well, if this be your feeling, then do ye not feel a great shame in holding your slaves to their bondage?"

"Yes, I do," Dave answered. "But if they were given their freedom right now, what would they do with it? Where would they go, and how would they manage to live? This thing started back in 1619 when the first slaves were imported to Virginia. The English did most of the slave trading at first, and then eventually our New England states entered the market. A lot of the southern states were against slavery in the beginning, but after the cotton gin was invented and cotton became king in the South, most southerners' attitudes changed. It became necessary for planters to have cheap labor, and a lot of it, in order to grow cotton in large quantities. Naturally, slave labor was the cheapest way and, therefore, the answer. It's a sad state of affairs, but right now there doesn't seem to be any other way. No planter could possibly afford to hire the amount of labor that has become a necessity."

"So the blessed cotton gin, in spite of its usefulness, ended up damning many a poor soul to a hopeless future," Jamie remarked.

"So it seems," agreed Dave. "We didn't start this mess, but I'm afraid we're all stuck with it. The best we can do is to remember that, regardless of their color or ignorance, Negroes are still human beings and should be treated as such. Someday maybe a way will be found to rectify the mistakes that have been made. Until that time, these poor devils are our responsibility, whether we like it or not."

"Well, it's still hard for me to be thinking of them as actual human beings like ourselves," said Jamie, scratching his head thoughtfully.

"In a sense they're not like us, and they probably never will be. Maybe that, too, is God's will. But that doesn't mean that they can't eventually have their own separate society, nor that the two individual societies can't live in harmony without intermixing the races. Of course, when you get right down to it, it's all going to work out the way the good Lord wants it to anyway. The sooner we stop worrying about what *we* want, and start trying to figure out what the Almighty wants, the better off we're all going to be!" Dave pushed his chair back and stood up to leave.

"Ye'll not be leaving us just yet, Mr. Devan? Why, I've got a fine pot of stew on that will melt in your mouth," Kate said over her shoulder while she briskly stirred the rich broth.

"Sorry, Kate. Maybe the next time I can stay for supper. I promised Mrs. Devan I'd be home for supper tonight, so I'd better be on my way."

"I need to be going, too, Kate," Jody said, feeling a bit queasy from the stew's aroma. Not yet realizing that she was pregnant, Jody attributed these recent spells of nausea to nerves.

After farewells were said, Jody and Dave took their leave. As they rode in silence, Jody thought of all Dave had said. Finally she said: "Dave, I just want you to know that I think you're right and I'm proud of you for standing by your convictions."

"Thanks. That means a lot to me, because your opinion is the only one that I really care about. But I really

don't deserve your praise. It's never hard to stand by what you know is right."

"Sometimes—sometimes it is," she answered, thinking of how difficult it was for her to stand by what she knew to be right in her own personal life.

Dave glanced at Jody and noticed how pale she looked. No words were needed to reassure him of her love, and he realized that her life must be as miserable and empty as his own, if not more so. At least Cheryl loved him, but he still doubted that John Dalton was capable of loving anyone other than himself. He wanted to ask Jody if she was happy, but he somehow could not force the words from his lips. He knew the answer without asking and his heart ached for her.

Changing the subject, he said, "Jody, I think I may have a temporary solution to the problem we were discussing. It seems like there's only a small handful of slaves who are actually stirring up resentment at my place, and the same apparently is true at yours. I plan to take this group and put them to work at the mill where they can't stir up any more trouble. I'd like to get Jamie to sort out the troublemakers at your place and let me put them to work at the mill, too. I'll pay you a fair price, if you'll let me hire them."

"Oh Dave, you're still trying to protect me. I do appreciate your thoughtfulness, but I can't let you go on taking care of me like this. You don't need any more help at the mill, and with times as hard as they are, I simply couldn't let you do it."

Dave reined in his horse beside Jody's and looked down at her. "Let me be the judge of what I need, and what I need the most is to know that you're safe. I don't want you to appreciate anything I do for you, because God knows it's little enough."

"But it is a lot to me, Dave. Just knowing that you care is the most important of all."

"I'll always care, Jody—but caring just isn't enough," he answered.

"It will have to be, Dave. That's all you can do," came

the soft reply. Tears clouded her eyes as she turned away from him and headed for home.

Dave did not try to follow her, but dejectedly watched her until she disappeared from view. With a weary sigh he turned his mount towards Oakhaven, a wave of loneliness engulfing him once again.

Chapter XXII

The hot and sultry September days lingered on as if reluctant to give way to the cool relief of fall. The unbearable humidity, coupled with the droves of mosquitoes and flies it spawned, did nothing to improve living conditions which already were deplorable due to the depression. Even Cheryl had spent an unpleasant summer at Oakhaven, though she was extremely vexed that anything so inconvenient as a depression should curtail her immediate pleasures. Her social life had come to an abrupt halt months ago, since most of her friends had been forced to conserve what little they had left by watching every penny. She was irritated that most of her social set had not followed Dave's example and avoided financial disaster. She felt no pity for their shortsightedness and only disgust for what she considered to be their stupidity.

To add further to Cheryl's irritability, Dave was seldom at home anymore. When he was not overseeing the crops he was usually at the mill, trying to figure out ways to cut expenses and thereby increase his profit. By this time he had become so familiar with operations that he often was able to give helpful suggestions to Big Tom, the foreman.

As a result of Dave's busy schedule, Cheryl had spent most of the boring summer with her son, Brian, as her only diversion. The deplorable situation had become in-

tolerable and her loneliness, along with her idleness, was beginning to wear on her stretched nerves, driving her to a feeling of sheer desperation.

Dave had forbidden her to drive into town until the humid weather passed, for it was in such weather as this that yellow fever usually struck. His uneasiness regarding a possible uprising still remained despite the fact that he had brought his most troublesome field hands to the mill to work. But until the tension of the situation eased, he refused to even consider Cheryl's leaving the house without him for any reason whatsoever.

At first Cheryl had been mollified by the knowledge that Dave was only trying to protect her, but as the sweltering summer days dragged on, her patience grew shorter, as did her temper.

Unable to endure her boredom any longer, she finally decided to risk his displeasure and drive out to the mill with Brian. Although the boy was two years old now, he had never been to the mill, and Cheryl felt that Dave would not object to such a visit; perhaps he would even appreciate the opportunity to show his fine son to his employees at the mill.

Doshe tried to discourage her from going, but Cheryl insisted that as long as their groom, Lemme, was driving them into town, she and Brian would be perfectly safe.

As the carriage jogged along the river road, her spirits lifted as she softly hummed a little tune to the small boy beside her. It was such a glorious day, she thought, and such a delight to be away from the stuffy confinement of Oakhaven. Upon reaching the mill, she gathered Brian in her arms and alighted from the carriage. There were a few items she needed from the general store, so she handed Lemme her shopping list and instructed him to be back at the mill in an hour.

Lemme watched her go with a sense of foreboding which he would have found difficult to explain. He had been a faithful and loyal servant to the Devans, and his devotion to them had always been sincere. To his relief, neither Cheryl nor Dave had ever suspected him of being involved in the uprising which had resulted in Jake Alan's

death; nor had Cheryl ever recognized him as the one whom she had lashed across the face with a buggy whip. The memory of that horrible night had remained vivid in his mind, often giving him such pangs of remorse that he felt there was nothing he could not do for the Devans to make amends for his breach of conduct so long ago.

Had he known beforehand that the brief moment of freedom would end in such violence, he never would have participated in the outbreak, but at the time, the prospect of being free had been too tempting to resist, causing him to join in the plot without giving a thought to the possible consequences. It never occurred to him that for a few, escape without revenge would never be enough. Intoxicated by their new freedom, as well as by the whisky one of them had swiped, the fugitive slaves had scampered happily along the river road. By the time Cheryl and Steve made their untimely appearance, the drunken men were already in a state of wild exhilaration. When Lemme realized the sinister intent of his cohorts, he was shocked back to his senses. Knowing that he was powerless to stop them, as well as fearing for his own life, he had quickly decided that his only chance was in trying to help the unsuspecting victims to escape. This was what he had attempted to do when he tried to get into Cheryl's carriage, but he had not foreseen that she would misunderstand his intentions. In terror Cheryl had lashed out at him with the whip, striking him hard across the face. The thin, telltale scar which still remained would always make it impossible for him to forget that ill-fated night; for some inexplicable reason, the memory was haunting him more than usual today.

Mindless of Lemme's worried expression, Cheryl briskly walked over to the small office and, without bothering to knock, entered the dingy room. A quick glance told her of Dave's absence and a look of annoyance passed over her face as her eyes came to rest on Tom Callahan, who was leaning back in a chair with his large feet propped up on the unkempt desk, lazily puffing on a corncob pipe.

"Howdy, Miz Devan. My, my—this is a pleasant sur-

prise!" Never having seen the boss's wife at the mill before, he swelled with a sense of pride at being the one to welcome her on her first visit, though he was puzzled as to why she had come. Realizing the untidiness of the room, he suddenly flushed with embarrassment and quickly dusted off a chair before offering it to her. With a tight smile Cheryl refused the invitation and asked where she might find her husband.

"Why, I reckon he's over in them clump of woods to the north, but he oughta be back in before too long."

Cheryl waited for a few minutes, watching for Dave through the dirty window, tapping her foot with impatience. Brian immediately began investigating the fascinating spittoon in the corner, though Cheryl—hot, tired and disappointed—did not seem to notice. She found the dirty little office to be most disagreeable, even depressing, but she hated to leave without seeing her husband.

"Mr. Callahan, I think Brian and I will walk over in that direction and try to meet Mr. Devan," she finally announced.

"Fine, Miz Devan. Jest let me put this here work up an' I'll be glad to walk you over there."

"That won't be necessary. I don't wish to trouble you and I'm sure there's no need for you to accompany us," came the crisp reply.

"Well—I don't know, Miz Devan," Tom said, scratching his bushy head in confusion. "It mought not be safe fer a lady like yerself to be walking around these here woods, with all them black devils out yonder."

"You needn't concern yourself, Mr. Callahan, I'm quite sure we'll be perfectly all right. We won't be venturing very far."

"Well, yes'm—if'n you don't go fer, I reckon it'd be all right," he agreed somewhat doubtfully. There was nothing else he could do, he realized, since he could hardly forbid the boss's wife to explore the premises, not without risking her husband's displeasure. With a defeated sigh, Tom rushed over to the door and opened it for her.

Thanking him for his assistance, Cheryl clutched Brian's grimy hand and swished through the door. As she

glided down the dirt path which led to the woods, her steps were so hurried that it was an effort for Brian to keep up with her. Noticing his lagging steps, she bent down and picked him up in her arms, then continued along the winding path. After a few minutes they came to a fork in the road. Cheryl paused for a brief moment and looked around, hoping to see some sign of Dave, for she felt uncertain as to which path to take. It was then that she became aware of the sound of voices just to the left of her and, assuming that it was Dave and his men, she left the path and gingerly picked her way through the dense undergrowth.

As she made her way towards the sound she had heard, she childishly decided that she would sneak up on Dave and surprise him. Visualizing his astonished expression, she struggled to suppress a happy giggle.

By this time, Brian had become thoroughly entranced with his new surroundings. He was tired of being carried in his mother's arms and anxious to get down and romp in his new playground. "Down, Mommie—down!" he pleaded impatiently.

"Hush, Brian. If you'll be real quiet, we'll sneak up on Daddy and give him a big surprise!" she said mischievously.

This idea appealed to Brian, so he instantly stopped his babbling and awaited the big moment. As the voices became louder, his big blue eyes widened with excitement. Deeper and deeper into the forest they walked, until they finally came upon a small clearing. But to Cheryl's surprise and dismay, Dave was not in sight. Instead, six Negroes were sitting on the ground in a tight little circle, busily discussing something in hushed, excited whispers. Cheryl immediately recognized them as being the trouble-makers who had been at Oakhaven.

A feeling of uneasiness swept over her, and she cautiously stepped behind a large elm tree. She knew that something was not right, since she was quite sure that Dave would never trust, much less allow, them out here alone. Quickly putting her hand over Brian's mouth, she strained to hear what was being said. Though she could

not catch all of their words, she heard enough of the conversation to realize what they were plotting—an escape! Sweat popped out on her forehead and her mouth became suddenly dry. She knew she had to get away from there without being seen, but how? If only she could leave without being observed and reach the safety of that little dirt path, but dare she even move? Frantically she tried to decide what action to take. She certainly could not stay where she was for long, for if one of them stood up, he surely would spot her voluminous skirts which unfortunately billowed out from the tree which she was now clinging to with trembling hands.

At that very moment Brian spotted a redbird and gave an unexpected yelp of pleasure. "Bird—see the pretty bird, Mommie!"

The blacks quickly jumped to their feet, spotting them immediately as Cheryl, scooping Brian up in her arms, turned and fled. She knew that if she could only reach the road, they would be safe. The fugitives would not dare risk chasing them on an open path, thus chancing being discovered by the lumbermen who were scattered throughout the woods. The weight of Brian, plus her many petticoats, made running extremely difficult, and she began to tire rapidly. Opening her mouth to scream for help, she was suddenly horrified to find that she could make no sound at all, and a backward glance confirmed her worst fears; their assailants were almost upon them. The warnings that Doshe, Lemme and Tom had given her that afternoon flashed across her mind, and she fervently wished that she had heeded their words.

She didn't see the fallen log which stretched out in front of her and, stumbling over it, she fell in a trembling heap on the damp ground. Bruised and frightened, Brian hid his face against his mother's breast and began to whimper. As she held the sobbing child tightly to her, one of the big blacks roughly yanked her to her feet.

"Whut we gwine ter do wid her?" asked one frightened man.

"Yeah—she sho' 'nough dun' heird whut we said," exclaimed another.

The leader of the group stepped forth and glared at Cheryl with such undisguised hatred that she trembled more violently than ever. "We's a'gwine ter do jes' lak we dun' plan't. We's gwine ter set fire ter dish heah woods so's de big boss'll be ter bizy wid hit ter knows we ain' dere. Den we's a'gwine ter run lak hell!" he stated emphatically.

Finding her voice, Cheryl screamed out hysterically and tried to wrench free from the vise-like grip of her captor. It was the last sound she made. With brutal strength, the huge black brought his club crashing down upon her head. As Cheryl slowly slipped to the ground, Brian tightened his grip around her neck. He did not like this game at all.

"Brian wanna go home," he cried over and over. But Cheryl did not answer his plea, for she could no longer hear him.

Dave walked briskly towards the mill office, his face lined with worry. Several of the slaves had been reported missing, and he was afraid this might be the beginning of the trouble he had anticipated. As he approached the little building, he saw Lemme sitting in the carriage a few feet away. Puzzled, Dave walked over to him.

"What are you doing out here, Lemme?"

"Ah's waitin' fer Miz Cheryl. She tole me ter be bak heah in uh hour, an' bak heah ah is," he exclaimed worriedly, sensing his master's displeasure.

"Is anything wrong?" Dave asked quickly.

"Naw'suh, she jes' 'cided ter gits out wid de baby fo' uh spell, Mist' Dave. Doshe an' me, we tries ter tell her yo' wou'nt rat'ly lak hit, but Miz Cheryl jes' wou'nt lis'en.

"Well, where is she now?"

"Las' times ah seed her, she wuz headin' fo' de office ter luk fer yo'," he said, pointing to the building.

Turning on his heels, Dave quickly walked over to the office and burst through the door. "Where is Mrs. Devan, Tom?"

"Why, ain't you seen her, Mr. Devan? She started out

to look for you almost an hour ago," Tom answered with surprise.

"Which way did she go?"

"She took the north path," the foreman replied. "I tried to git her to let me go with her, but she wouldn't have it. You don't reckon she's lost, do you?"

"That's the least of my worries right now. Six of the slaves have escaped, and if she runs into them, God only knows what they'll do to her!"

"I'll go round up some of the boys, Mr. Devan. We'll find her, don't you worry," Tom asserted as he flung open the door. Then he abruptly stopped and moaned. "Oh no . . . oh God, no!"

Dave rushed to the door and looked towards the north section. Smoke was billowing out of the forest, and Dave sensed that his worst suspicions had been correct. He was not sure how many of the slaves were actually involved, but he was certain that at least the six missing would try to escape, using the mounting fire as their only shield. It was an ingenious plan, and Dave realized that everyone's energies would have to be directed to fighting the fire and trying to find Cheryl and Brian. Any slaves who escaped would have to be rounded up later. Right now, his main concern was finding his wife and child.

Most of the hired hands had already noticed the smoke and had started grabbing shovels and equipment with which to fight the fire.

"You take charge of getting that fire stopped, Tom. I'll take some men and start looking for my wife. You're sure she headed for the north section?" Dave asked, hoping Tom was mistaken. For if Cheryl had gone into that section, she was not only in danger from the runaway slaves, but also from the fire that was quickly building into an inferno.

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Devan. I seen her start up yonder path myself, with the little fella right beside her," Tom answered.

With sinking spirits, Dave rounded up a handful of men and started up the path which led to the north section. He soon discovered that there were areas to the left

of the path which were virtually impossible to explore, due to the intensity of the smoke and heat. Unable to stop the blaze in the north section, the fire fighters were desperately attempting to keep the blaze under control and away from the other sections of the forest. Therefore, Dave and his men were confined to searching those sections rather than to the north.

As nightfall approached and the search continued, there still was no sign of Cheryl and Brian. With a feeling of despair, Dave knew that the possibility of Cheryl's being in the northern section was fast becoming a probability. By dawn, most of the fire had been subdued. The few slaves who had remained pitched in and gladly did their share, taking great pride in being able to work alongside the other fire fighters. Their combined efforts brought definite results; little damage was actually done to any of the wooded area except to the north. This area, however, was still smoldering, and it was impossible to take a search party in to look for Cheryl and the boy.

Dave was too dazed to think clearly, but he knew that no human being could possibly come out of those smoldering woods alive. Yet he had to be sure before he would completely give up hope. He could only wait until the fire died out, then hope for the best.

By late afternoon of the following day, the men were finally able to resume their search in the devastated area; the search, however, did not last long. The men had not gone far when Dave spotted the charred remains of Cheryl and Brian lying beneath the burning remnants of a tall pine tree. In death, Brian still clung to his mother's scorched body, even as he must have done in the last pathetic moments of his short life. Stunned into silence, the group of men viewed the tragic sight of what once had been Dave's family. Then, for the first and only time in his life, Dave collapsed.

Dave was moved to Belle Glen where Jody could tend to him, but even after the shock subsided, he remained lethargic. It seemed as though he sank into a deeper melancholia with each passing day. Jody was beside herself with

grief and worry, as she found herself powerless to help him. It was as if they were complete strangers now, and at times she even wondered if he still recognized her. Fearing for his sanity, she prayed constantly for guidance in finding some way to help him.

That guidance came in an unexpected manner and in the form of an argument between John and herself which Dave overheard. Jody had just finished coaxing him to eat his breakfast when John walked gloomily into the bedroom. John had never approved of Dave's being moved to Belle Glen in the first place, and it was apparent that he now was in another one of his disagreeable moods.

Picking up the breakfast tray, Jody quickly walked past her husband, hoping he would at least wait until they were downstairs before he spoke, but as she had feared, he stopped her in the hall.

"Well, my dear, how is your precious patient today?"

"I think he's doing somewhat better," she replied crisply. She reached out to shut Dave's door to prevent him from hearing what was sure to be an unpleasant conversation, but John grabbed her wrist.

"Why, how could he do otherwise, with such a sweet saint to watch over him?" he sneered.

"Please, John, not now. I'm exhausted," she murmured tiredly.

"Strange, you're never too tired to watch over him day and night, but when your own husband requests a few moments of your time, suddenly you're too damn tired!"

"What would you have me do—turn him out? He was my sister's husband, and I'm the only family he has left now. Surely even you can't be so heartless as to resent my trying to care for him."

"And no doubt you would like for me to forget that he was once your lover, my pet, but I'm not that big a fool! You've never stopped loving him, have you?"

"John, please! He might hear you," she whispered vexedly, glancing towards Dave who was still staring out the window.

"And if he did, what difference would it make? He doesn't know what's going on around him. Don't you

understand, Jody? His mind is gone! Your knight in shining armor is only a broken man! In his present state, I doubt that even you interest him."

"How can you be so cruel? God only knows how I have to force myself to live with an animal like you!" she exclaimed disgustedly.

"But live with me you shall, my dear. You've made your bed, and now you'll just have to lie in it. Perhaps even tonight!" he laughed. Jody caught the warning in his words and shuddered.

"Well, we'll just have to see about that, won't we? If I decide to come home tonight, perhaps I can give you the diversion which you so obviously are needing," he added maliciously, giving her cheek a pinch as he departed. Jody watched him go as a wave of nausea swept over her. She was about to carry the tray downstairs when she heard Dave call to her. Jody almost dropped the tray in surprise, for it was the first time Dave had spoken since the fire. She quickly set the tray down and rushed over to him, kneeling beside his chair.

Dave looked at her solemnly and began to gently brush the loose tendrils of hair from her face. "I'm afraid I've caused you a lot of trouble," he said blankly.

"No, dearest—you know you haven't. I'm just so happy you're better," she said as the tears rolled down her cheeks.

Dave cupped her face in his hands and groped for his next words. "You lead a pretty miserable life, don't you, my dear? I never realized just how miserable it was until now."

"You—you heard us out in the hall," she murmured regretfully.

"Yes, I heard you. Why didn't you let me know how he treats you? I was a fool to allow you to marry him," he said sorrowfully.

"It wasn't your fault. You tried to warn me and I wouldn't listen. You mustn't worry about me. It isn't always this bad," she lied as she put her head on his knee.

"Jody, I can't stay here any longer. I've got to get away

from here and everything that reminds me of—of what happened.”

“But where will you go?” she asked in alarm.

“I don’t know yet, but wherever it is, I want you with me.”

“You know I can’t do that,” Jody replied in a choked whisper.

“But you can, Jody—in fact, you must! I’m sure a divorce could be obtained if all the facts were presented. Certainly no one would doubt your word.”

“Dave, don’t you see that even with a divorce it would be almost the same as living in open sin? Would you have us live the miserable life that poor Rachel and Andrew Jackson lived?” she cried.

“But that was different, Jody. By some unfortunate mistake, they were married before Rachel’s divorce from her first husband was final. Don’t you see, it wouldn’t be the same with us at all.”

With a tired sigh, Jody rose and walked over to the window. “It isn’t just that, Dave,” she said hesitantly.

“Then what is it, Jody? Surely you can’t be in love with John?”

“No, of course not.” Jody paused for a second, trying to find the right words to say, but there were none. She had no comforting words to give him, only the truth, which now seemed like a tragedy. “I will bear John a child in the spring,” she stated bluntly. As she turned to face Dave, she saw the look of raw anguish on his face.

“Why, Jody? How can this be, if you don’t love him?” he asked in disbelief.

“I couldn’t help it. He—he forced me,” she cried, burying her face in her hands. “He doesn’t even know about it yet. Maybe it will change him,” she muttered miserably.

Dave bolted from his chair and was beside her instantly. As he pulled Jody to him, hate burned in his dark eyes. “Damn his filthy soul to hell—I’ll kill him for this!”

“No! No, you mustn’t,” Jody sobbed. “He had every right to do what he did. Regardless of how I felt about him, I was and still am his wife. If our life is unhappy to-

gether, then I'm the one to blame. I knew I didn't love him when I married him."

"But what are you going to do? You can't go on like this. It's inhuman—insane!" Dave argued.

"Yes, I can go on, and I must. As John so aptly put it, I made my bed, and now I must lie in it." Gently she moved away from him.

"Then this is goodbye?" Dave asked hoarsely.

"I'm afraid it must be," Jody managed to reply. She tried to smile at him, but she found that tears were choking her. Not wanting him to see her cry again, she turned and walked to the door.

As Dave watched her cross the room, he knew that he would never love her more than he loved her at that moment. "Jody, wherever I am, all you have to do is send for me if you ever need me," he said as she paused at the door.

"Yes, I know," she replied simply. Then she quietly slipped out the door—and with her went Dave's heart.

Chapter XXIII

By the spring of 1840, even the well-to-do planters were feeling the pinch of the protracted depression. The hardest-hit areas, however, were in the cities. Food and fuel were scarce for many families who were barely able to afford such necessities.

Times were also difficult for Jody, since the crops of '39 had not been sold for as good a price as usual. After the necessary amount had been set aside for the plantation's expenditures, and John's enormous gambling debts had once again been settled, there was little left for actual living expenses. There was, however, no shortage of food at Belle Glen, for livestock and poultry were in abundance and there was always a succulent ham or a heaping platter of golden fried chicken on the family table. Thad's green thumb provided each meal with an ample variety of vegetables which had been grown in the small garden at the rear of the house.

In every other respect, though, times were hard at Belle Glen. Jody had managed to put aside a small amount with which to buy material for three gowns to wear during her confinement, though the material purchased was only a cheap grade of calico and already looking shabby and drab. She was hoping that, once the baby came, her figure would resume its normal size so that she could go

back to wearing her other clothes, though they also were faded and worn.

True to his word, Dave had left Vicksburg six months ago. It had not taken him long to settle his affairs once his mind had been made up. The house at Oakhaven was closed and all the slaves were sold, with the exception of Doshe and Lemme, whom he left with Jody. The mill was left in the capable hands of Tom Callahan, but realizing Tom's inability to keep books, he hired Maude Miller to assist in this area during his absence.

Though Maud still owned the saloon, the generous salary which Dave agreed to pay for her services, not to mention her personal interest in Tom Callahan, made it impossible for her to refuse his offer. Then, too, she liked the man and realized that he really needed her help in keeping the financial end of the mill straight until he returned. He was a smart one, and a real gent to boot.

If Dave's business arrangements with his sister-in-law seemed a little peculiar to her, she kept her opinions to herself. It was, after all, his business if he chose to pay her a more than generous amount for the use of her slaves at the mill. Nor did she continue to ponder over this particular idiosyncrasy once she was better acquainted with Jody. Since Dave had instructed her to personally deliver the money to Jody each week, she soon got to know the younger girl quite well. Within a short time, a strong bond of friendship developed, despite the fact that they actually had little in common; nothing really, other than their mutual interest in Dave.

Always a discerning person, Maude soon realized that Jody's marriage was not a happy one, nor did it take her long to figure out that the girl was hopelessly in love with Dave. Though Jody never betrayed her feelings by word or deed, her enormous green eyes became wistful whenever his name was mentioned, which was often, for Dave corresponded regularly with Maude on business matters and Maude always relayed whatever news there was of him to Jody.

Meanwhile, Dave's sound investments, along with his adeptness at gambling, enabled him to live comfortably

anywhere he chose, which was never in any one place for very long. Maude suspected that the loss of his family, particularly his little son, had affected him deeply, but she also knew that this was not the real reason for his leaving Vicksburg; the real reason, she felt sure, was Jody. He must love her, for why else would he take such measures to ensure her well-being? The situation being what it was, she could understand his reluctance to return home; yet she hoped that he would—and soon.

Doc Blanks had predicted that the baby would arrive the latter part of April, which meant any time now. Despite Jody's assurances that she was feeling fine, Maude thought she looked unusually pale and wan, certainly not sturdy enough to bear a child. She had casually mentioned this in her last letter to Dave, hoping it would prompt him to return home, but so far she had received no reply. Her uneasiness increased as the end of April rolled around and Jody's appearance failed to improve; death was not an unusual occurrence in childbirth, and Jody appeared anything but strong.

When John discovered that Jody was to bear him a child, he had been elated over the prospect. Not overly concerned with her health, he nevertheless treated her with a little more kindness, although he never forgot or forgave her for being in love with Dave. Never for a moment did he doubt that the baby was his, for though Jody might love Dave, he felt she was incapable of committing adultery. Besides that, he had kept a constant watch over her ever since the night he had discovered her feelings toward Dave, and he was sure there had been no opportunity for her to be unfaithful to him. He had made certain of that. Hoping for a boy, he had already informed Jody that the child would be named John Dalton II. Jody had not argued, because it seemed of little importance. Had it been Dave's child, her attitude would have been different; she would have cherished carrying his child in her body, despite the discomfort. As it was, she felt nothing.

John's improved behavior towards his wife lasted until

the end of March, and then all of his resistance crumbled. Restless and impatient for the arrival of the child, he began to long for some kind of excitement to break the monotony. His frustration eventually overcame his good intentions, and once again he began to visit the gambling establishments and whorehouses along the waterfront.

It was on one of these nights that he unexpectedly encountered Dave, who had returned to Vicksburg that very afternoon. Folding his poker hand, John excused himself and walked over to the highly polished bar where Dave stood talking to Ben Johnson.

"Well, if it isn't Mr. Devan," he sneered rudely.

"Hello, John," Dave responded unenthusiastically.

"And to what do we owe the honor of your visit to our fair community?"

Dave immediately realized that John had been drinking too much and was in a nasty mood. He also knew John was trying to needle him into an argument. "I hardly think you'd call me a visitor, John," Dave answered lightly as he turned to resume his conversation with Ben.

"No, I daresay no one could call you that, not since you first pushed your way into our select little group and, I might add, even into our homes!" retorted John, stepping between Dave and Ben.

"See here, John, you're making a damned nuisance of yourself," Ben blustered.

"It's all right, Ben. I'm afraid our friend has had a bit too much to drink," Dave intervened, wishing to avoid a scene. "Look, John, why don't you go on home and sleep it off. Jody's probably worrying about you right now."

"Ah, yes, my devoted wife. But devoted to whom, I wonder!"

"That's enough, John. You're going too far," Dave interrupted sharply.

"Not I, Dave—but you. You've already gone too far—with my wife! Now you have apparently returned to resume your little affair with her!" he shouted, making a sudden lunge for Dave.

Dave's reflexes acted quicker than his reasoning and his fist suddenly shot out, sending John sprawling to the floor.

As he lay there unconscious, Dave glared at him with undisguised hatred. He personally did not care who knew that he loved Jody, but John's openly destroying his wife's good name in a public gambling house was unforgivable. For the first time in his life, he actually ached to kill another man in cold blood, but he realized that such violence would only add to the irreparable damage which had already been done. An embarrassing silence fell upon the crowded room, with everyone feeling rather stunned by the scene they had just witnessed.

Ben cleared his throat and attempted to break the uncomfortable silence. "I'll take John home, Dave. He'll more than likley be out for the rest of the night."

"Thanks, Ben, but I'll take him home," Dave replied as he stooped to hoist the limp body over his shoulder.

Walking out of the room, Dave could hear the hushed whispers of the men as they resumed their poker games. He realized he must tell Jody of the incident before she heard it from another source. There obviously would be talk, and although he did not care for his own sake, he wished desperately that Jody could have been spared the malicious gossip which undoubtedly would follow. Knowing her as he did, he thought that such an ordeal would be unbearable for her, especially since she would be bearing John's child any day now.

"Damn his black soul to hell," he muttered, roughly slinging John's inert body over the rump of his horse.

Little ever occurred which passed unobserved by the houseservants, for eavesdropping was an art that was practiced daily in most of the homes where they worked. Lemme had learned that particular art quite well. As Dave handed his reins to the beaming darky, Lemme's eyes bulged with open curiosity.

"Lawsy, Mist' Dave! We sho' wusn' 'spectin' you dis night. Mighty good ter see you, suh. Mighty good!"

"Thank you, Lemme. Is Miss Jody still up?"

"Yas'suh, she sho' am," he answered, his curiosity growing with each moment as he looked past Dave towards the limp body of his master. Finally, curiosity

overcoming caution, he asked: "Whut done hopen't ter Mist' John? He's plum' out lak uh light!"

"You might say that he met with an accident. I believe he'll be all right by morning though," Dave answered shortly. "Do you think you can manage to get him upstairs and into bed?"

"Yas'suh, no trouble t'all," came the response as Lemme shuffled over to where John was dangling across the saddle of his horse. He still had not regained consciousness, so the darky gathered him in his powerful arms and carried him up the veranda steps with the ease with which he might have carried a small child.

"Oh, and Lemme—ask Miss Jody if she could step to the porch for a moment."

"Yas'suh, ah sho' will." Lemme quickened his step, for he was anxious to get back unobserved and find out what had happened. He never got to deliver his message, however; upon hearing the voices on the veranda, Jody had come to the front door and opened it. The shock of seeing Dave immobilized her, rendering her speechless until Lemme brushed by her in an attempt to get through the doorway she was blocking. Then, noticing John for the first time, a cry of alarm escaped her trembling lips.

"What happened? Is he hurt badly?" she asked, looking anxiously from Lemme to Dave.

"No, Jody. He'll be all right by morning. It's nothing for you to get excited about, believe me," Dave quickly assured her.

With a sigh of relief, Jody stepped aside and allowed John to be carried inside the house. Turning to Dave, she briefly hesitated.

"It—it's nice to see you again, Dave. Maude said—that is—I didn't realize you'd be coming home so soon," she stammered finally.

"I wasn't, but I had some business to attend to here," he smoothly lied.

"Oh, I see. Then you won't be in Vicksburg for long?" she asked, trying to hide her disappointment. She had hoped that he had returned because of her. She had even dared to hope that perhaps he had come back to stay.

Dave hesitated a moment before he answered her. "I don't know yet, Jody. That depends on—well, on a lot of things."

His answer somewhat eased her mind, and she reluctantly brought the conversation back to John. "Dave, what happened to John?"

Now that Jody had asked the question he had been dreading, Dave knew that he must tell her the whole story. Searching for the right words, he carefully told her of the embarrassing incident. As the story unfolded, Jody remained motionless, and he began to fear that the whole mess might prove to be too much for her in her present condition.

"Jody, sit down, please," Dave said gently.

"No, I'm all right. Really, I am. It's just that—it is somewhat of a shock. I had no idea John hated me so much. How could he have done such a horrible thing? Not only to me, but to his child I'm carrying?"

Sensing her anguish, Dave longed to pull her to him and comfort her; instead, he took her hand and squeezed it. "He's sick, Jody. Not in his body, but in his mind and soul."

"Yes, I guess he is, and it's mostly my fault," she answered bleakly. She felt that she wanted to cry, but the tears would not come.

"Nothing is your fault, Jody, and I don't want to hear you say that again. You've stuck by John through thick and thin, even though you never loved him. John should fall on his knees and thank God he's lucky enough to have you for a wife."

"But don't you see, Dave? He wouldn't be this way if it weren't for me. I've caused him nothing but unhappiness," she cried.

"You're wrong, Jody. You haven't caused him anything. He never was any good, and I'm afraid he never will be, no matter what you do. Don't blame yourself for his stupid mistakes."

They talked for a few more minutes before reluctantly parting. Yet, long after Dave had gone, Lemme remained in the clump of bushes at the end of the veranda where he

had been eavesdropping. He felt sorry for his sweet mistress, and a wave of angry frustration washed over him as he realized how John had shamed her. He had become almost as devoted to Jody as he had been to her sister, but he had never been able to feel this same loyalty towards John. Now he understood why. The master was too mean to go on living, he thought to himself. He had cruelly and deliberately hurt Miss Jody, and for this—he was going to pay with his life, he decided darkly. A plan began to form in the back of his mind as he walked slowly back to his own cabin.

The next morning John woke with a sluggish headache and a black eye which was swollen almost shut. As he dressed for breakfast, the embarrassing events of the previous night flashed across his bleary mind, and by the time he had reached the dining room a heavy feeling of guilt invaded him. Jody greeted him so coldly that there could be no doubt she had heard about the unfortunate incident.

Throughout the gloomy meal, he made several futile attempts to converse with her, but Jody seemed so remote that he finally lapsed into silence. Choking down the last of his coffee, John then attempted to approach the subject another way.

"I'm afraid I don't remember much about last night," he began, then paused, hoping she would make some kind of reply. When none came, he became more flustered than even. "I—I guess I must have overdone it a bit," he stammered.

Still there was no reply.

"Who brought me home?" he finally asked, dreading the expected answer. He somehow guessed that it had been Dave.

"Dave Devan," Jody confirmed simply.

John's embarrassment immediately turned into resentment. "How very gallant of him. I suppose he told you all about last night."

"Yes, he told me." Jody carefully pushed her chair away from the table and stood up to face him.

"He must have taken great delight in telling you every detail," came the sarcastic retort.

"No, I don't think he took delight in any part of it, especially not in having to tell me."

"You'd defend him to the bitter end, wouldn't you! Do you still love him that much?"

Ignoring his question, Jody tried to walk past him, but he roughly grabbed her arm and yanked her to him.

"I asked you a question. Do you still love him?" he demanded, his long fingers squeezing around her arm.

Jody looked at him solemnly for a moment, then she answered him quite calmly. "Yes, I love him. I always have, and I always will."

Never in John's life had he wanted to hurt anyone as much as he now wanted to hurt Jody; but as long as she carried his child, he dared not. Clenching his free hand to keep from hitting her, he struggled for self-control while he glared at her.

"I don't want you to ever see him again, do you understand? I absolutely forbid him to set foot in this house again!" he all but shouted.

Jody's temper snapped. How dared he imagine that he could forbid anyone to come into her own home after he had treated her as he had! Not only had he indulged himself with every harlot on the waterfront, but he had also gambled away most of her inheritance. Only Belle Glen was left, and even that was mortgaged. Raising her chin in defiance, Jody looked at him contemptuously. For the first time she was seeing him as he really was—weak, selfish and completely immoral. Dave had known this all along, but she had refused to believe him.

"You seem to forget that this house belongs to me," Jody said.

John was momentarily stunned, for Jody had never held anything over him as a threat. It was completely unlike her, and he immediately attributed her disagreeable attitude to her delicate condition.

"Perhaps I spoke somewhat hastily. Of course it is unforgivable for me to upset you at a time like this. We can discuss this matter after—well another time."

"No, John. We will discuss it here and now," she replied coldly. "I have given the matter a great deal of thought, and I have decided that I want a divorce."

The unspeakable word, now spoken, struck at John as though it were a blade of steel. He stood there dumb-founded, with a ridiculous look on his face. With an effort he struggled to get control of himself. "Divorce! Why—why you must be joking. It's absolutely unthinkable! I haven't the slightest intention of divorcing you, not now or in the future. Really, Jody, I believe your condition has somewhat addled your brains," he declared indignantly.

"I'm afraid your intentions are not the only ones to be considered in this matter. You have given me more than sufficient grounds, so that your consent is not really necessary. As a matter of fact, I had scarcely expected to have it," Jody asserted calmly.

John could hardly believe what he was hearing. Divorce was not only extremely unpopular, it was downright scandalous! Such action was only sought when there was absolutely no other alternative, and even then it was looked on unfavorably by society. Surely Jody must be jesting. True, their marriage had left much to be desired, but it certainly had not been so unbearable as to cause her to be willing to submit the both of them to ruthless gossip! What could she be thinking of by suggesting such a ridiculous thing?

"When you've come to your senses, which I pray will be soon, you will regret these hasty words you've spoken. I think it is best that we forget this sordid little scene and, for your peace of mind later on, I will say in advance that I forgive you," he stated with as much dignity as he could muster.

"That's very generous of you, but your forgiveness is hardly important, because I have no intention of changing my mind. I have already instructed Uncle Thad to pack a valise for you, since I feel we can't possibly live under the same roof any longer. I'll send the rest of your things to you as soon as you're settled."

"You—you're throwing me out of my own house?" John asked in utter astonishment.

"No, I'm asking you to leave *my* house. Our marriage was a mistake from the very beginning, and I see no reason why we should go on making life miserable for each other."

"Oh, fine—that's just fine! And after you've gotten rid of me, I suppose you intend to marry your precious brother-in-law. That's what you've wanted all along, isn't it? Only he didn't want you, because he was in love with your sister. You must have thought that by marrying me you would make him jealous. That's why you married me, wasn't it?" he raved.

"Stop it, John. It was never like that at all. I don't deny I've always loved Dave. I loved him from the first moment I saw him. When he married Cheryl, I tried desperately to forget him, but I couldn't—I just couldn't! I thought if I married you, I would eventually be able to forget him, but it didn't work. God knows I tried to love you, even though you caused me to lose everything I had because of your gambling debts and your women."

"You're a fine one to talk. And how many times has Devan had you, may I ask! Do you think he still wants you now? Look at you—no man in his right mind is going to want to marry a woman who's carrying another man's child! And especially not one whose pleasures, shall we say, he has already sampled! Why in the name of God should he? No, my dear, I'm afraid you're deluding yourself as far as Dave Devan is concerned," he finished maliciously.

He still did not believe that Jody had committed adultery, not in the fullest sense of the word anyway, but he was now prepared to say anything to hurt and frighten her. He would stop at nothing to keep her from going to Dave.

As Jody listened to John's vindictive words, she began to feel desperately ill. She had not given any thought to her future. Her only concern since last night had been to be rid of this monstrous man who called himself her husband. John's words struck home, and a feeling of panic overcame her. She had not thought of leaving John in order to marry Dave, but was that not what she had sub-

consciously wanted? What if the things John said just now were true? Perhaps Dave would not want to marry her now. The fact that she had been married to John had not seemed to matter to Dave two years ago. Many times, she had remembered the brief intimacy they had shared in her bedroom on the day of the tornado. But even then, Dave had not expressed any wish to marry her; only to own her physically! Although he had asked her several months ago to obtain a divorce from John and leave Vicksburg with him, he had not actually made any mention of marrying her. Perhaps she had misunderstood Dave's intentions all along, if indeed he had ever had any.

As if reading her thoughts, John said more gently: "Jody, please reconsider. After the child comes, I promise that things will be better between us. You can't deprive me of my child!"

Tears welled up in Jody's eyes. "I know that I'm as much to blame as you, John, even though I never intended to cause you any unhappiness. I have no wish to hurt you now, truly I haven't. But I simply cannot go on living with you. I don't love you, and for the first time I realize that I never shall. To continue living with you, feeling as I do, would be the greatest sin of all. We could never find any happiness together now. Don't you see that?"

John's temper flared and his face turned crimson with rage. Breathing heavily, he said, "I only see one thing, and that I see clearly. As long as Dave Devan is alive, I can never have you. But have you I shall—one way or another!"

"What—what do you mean?" asked Jody in alarm.

"Just this. Had it not been for him, we might have had a happy marriage. Without him, we still might be able to," he answered, turning abruptly to leave.

"John—John, please don't cause any more trouble. What do you intend to do?" Jody asked worriedly.

"What I should have done a long time ago. I'm going to kill him!"

"No, oh no! Nothing can help our marriage now. Please don't do anything foolish," she pleaded, but John

did not hear her. He had already stormed out of the house, slamming the front door behind him.

Had John not been so upset, he might have noticed the expression of hatred on Lemme's black face as the Negro brought his horse around to the front of the house. Had he not been so bent on revenge, he would undoubtedly have noticed how the horse shied and whinnied, as if in pain, when he first mounted. And above all, he would have felt the looseness of the saddle beneath him. So intense was his anger, however, that he noticed none of these things until it was too late.

Viciously lashing the horse's flank with his crop, John rode down the gravel driveway which led to the front gate. The gate was usually left open, but today, for some unknown reason, it was closed.

Jody threw open the front door just in time to see John's body soar over the fence and land in a grotesque heap on the other side. The horse stood quivering by the closed gate, the saddle hanging lopsidedly beneath the animal's belly.

Lemme was the first to reach the gate, and he quickly tethered the excited animal to the gatepost. Then he deftly removed the burr from underneath the saddle, where he had placed it only seconds before. The horse immediately quieted, and Lemme opened the gate and knelt beside the limp body on the ground. A sinister smile passed briefly over his dark face, for he saw that John's neck had been broken in the fall. Picking the lifeless body up in his powerful arms, he started back to the house.

Jody knew long before Lemme reached the porch that John was dead. As the darky brought her husband's body nearer, she vaguely noticed the awkward angle of John's drooping head. Then everything about her began to spin and she sank into a merciful faint.

Chapter XXIV

The sound of thunder in the far-off distance invaded the eerie silence of Jody's bedroom. As her eyes slowly fluttered open, the present evaded her for a brief moment. Then she remembered, with acute pain, the tragedy which she had witnessed only a short time ago. The horrible sight of John's helpless body sailing over the fence rushed to her mind, causing her to moan with anguish. Mammy Lou was instantly beside her, comforting her as if she were once again a small child.

"Dere, dere, Miss Jody. Hit's gwine ter be aw'rat. Jes' yo' lies dere an' res' 'til yo' gits yo' stren'th bak."

Looking towards the window, Jody was surprised to see that it was already dusk. She had apparently been unconscious most of the day.

John was dead and, though his death was the result of an accident, she felt that she was somehow responsible. The guilt of their last argument, their last words, loomed before her. Had they not quarreled, he might be alive now. If only her parting words to him had been kinder; then she would have had some consolation. As it was, she had none, and she blamed herself bitterly.

As she shakily tried to get up, an unexpected pain struck at her middle, leaving her breathless.

"Wut am de matter wif mah lamb? Is yo' time cum'?"

Mammy Lou asked as she made a grab for Jody to keep her from pitching head-first to the floor.

Unable to speak, Jody nodded, and perspiration broke out on her forehead. Worried, Mammy Lou quickly propped her against the pillows, then hurried to the door.

"Thad—Thad! Yo' gits yo'sef' up heah rat now. Hur'hy up, nigga," she yelled impatiently, hearing his slow footsteps shuffling up the stairs. Watching him move was like watching molasses pouring out of a pitcher in January! Whoever had taught him to speak apparently had forgotten to explain to him the meaning of the word *hurry*, as a fast trot for Thad was little more than a slow shuffle for everyone else!

"Ah's a-cumin', ah's a-cumin', jes' as fas' as ah kin," he drawled grumpily.

"Tell Lemme Miss Jody am sick, an' fo' him ter go fetch de doc'tah, an' be fas' about hit!"

"Yas'm, sho' 'nough. She ain' a-dyin', is she? She's gwine ter be aw'rat, ain' she?" Thad asked, suddenly worried.

"Hesh yo' big mouf, yo' worthless no'count, an' do whut ah's dun tole yo'!"

"Yas'm—ah's a-gwine. Ah's a-gwine," he mumbled as he strove to amble a little faster towards the door.

Turning back to Jody, Mammy Lou began to examine her. Her many years of experience as a midwife now made her quickly realize that this would not be an easy birth. Jody, being extremely small through the hips, was simply not made for childbearing. In fact, Mammy Lou had secretly been worried about her recently, as Jody's body had swollen to enormous proportions. She could only hope that the doctor would arrive in time. A sigh of relief escaped her as she heard Lemme ride out at break-neck speed.

Racing into town in the dilapidated carriage, Lemme headed straight for the doctor's house. A light drizzle began to fall as darkness descended on the quiet town. A flash of lightning occasionally illuminated the gray skies, followed by a loud clap of thunder.

Lemme feared the storm might break before he could get the doctor back to Belle Glen. Should that happen, he knew that the buckshot river road would quickly turn into a sticky muck which would make it almost impossible to travel. As he approached the end of town, he saw Dave going into the saloon. Lemme wished he could stop and tell him about the mistress, but knowing time was essential, he sped on through town.

When he finally reached the doctor's house, he found it dark and apparently empty. Racing up the side steps, he ran to the door and banged on it urgently. There was a note on the door which read: "Doctor and Mrs. Blanks out of town. Will be back Monday."

Unfortunately, Lemme could not read, but instinct told him that the note pertained to the doctor's absence. As he tried to think of what to do next, Lemme remembered seeing Dave, so he hurriedly returned to the carriage and headed back to the saloon. Luck was with him, for Dave had just sat down to a friendly game of poker.

As he looked up from the hand of cards he was holding, he spied the excited Lemme frantically trying to motion to him. Excusing himself, he sauntered outside to where Lemme was prancing from one foot to the other with impatience.

"Lawsy me, Mist' Dave. Ah sho' am glad ter fin' yo'! Mist' John dun got his'sef' kilt dis heah mawnin', an' Miss Jody am bout ready ter drap dat deah baby rat now. Ah gots ter fin' dat doctuh sumpin' fas'!"

"Did you go to the doctor's house?" asked Dave.

"Yas'suh, ah sho' did, but he wuzn't deah, ah reckons. Ah foun' dis on de do'," Lemme replied, pulling the wrinkled piece of paper from his pocket.

Dave read the note, then crumpled it into a ball. He knew there was not another doctor for at least twenty-five miles, and fear for Jody overcame him as he vividly recalled the misery Cheryl had suffered in bearing Brian. Remembering Doshe, Dave felt grateful for midwives. Still, if complications set in, he doubted that even Doshe would have enough experience to handle the situation.

Dave got into the carriage and took the reins from

Lemme's shaking hands. Damn doctors, anyway! There's never one around when you need one, he thought irritably. Little did he know, nor would he have even cared, that the old doctor and his wife had gone to an aunt's funeral in Natchez. All that mattered to Dave at the moment was Jody.

On the way out to Belle Glen, Lemme incoherently told him about John's death, naturally excluding his part in the accident. He was mighty sorry Miss Jody had taken on over it so, and he hoped it would not mark the baby; but outside of that, he felt proud of what he had done. In fact, he no more regretted his sinful deed than he would have regretted killing a rattlesnake. In his simple mind, John Dalton had been no better than a snake.

"What about Mrs. O'Rourke? Maybe she could help," suggested Dave.

"Naw'suh, she dun tuk sick yisterdy wid a cole, and she am still feelin' po'ly. Mist' Jamie dun tuk off fer New Orleans las' week ter pick up sum plantin' stuff, an' he ain' bak yit!" wailed Lemme.

The outlook seemed black indeed. Luck was partially with them, however, for just as they reached the front veranda, the threatening storm broke in all its fury. Lightning zigzagged across the black sky to reveal angry clouds churning over the river. Thunder crashed all around as the storm intensified.

Uncle Thad and Doshe were standing anxiously at the door, waiting hopefully for the doctor.

"Mist Dave, ah's glad yo' is heah," said Uncle Thad as Dave brushed by him.

"Whar am de doctuh, Mist' Dave? Didn't Lemme fetch him lak he wuz tole?" Doshe asked fearfully.

"The doctor is out of town, Doshe. I'm afraid you and Mammy Lou will just have to manage by yourselves this time."

"Naw'suh, oh naw'suh! Ah cain' heps dis time, Mist' Dave. Miss Jody ain' havin' no birthin' lak ah is eber seed!"

"What do you mean? What's wrong?" Dave asked,

grabbing Doshe's arm in such a fierce grip that her black eyes widened with fright.

"Mist' Dave, please don' hu't me. Yo' knows ah'd hep' ef'n ah could, but ah jes' don' knows 'nough. Ah ain' no doctuh!"

Dave pushed by her and rushed up the curving staircase. Reaching the landing, he almost collided with Mammy Lou, who had heard the commotion and thought the doctor had come.

"Whar am de doctuh, Mist' Dave?"

"He didn't come. He's out of town."

"Oh Lawd Gawd, wut we's a'gwine ter do, Mist' Dave? Miss Jody am too small fer dat baby ter drap outa deah, an' she am in ter'ble mis'ry. She's a'gwine ter die ef'n we don't gits a doctuh," the old Negro whispered, tears sliding down her fat, black cheeks.

Dave's mind raced as he tried to think of what to do. It had been years since he had studied medicine, but as a student he had often assisted with operations, once with an unusual case involving a pregnant woman whose pelvis had been too narrow for her to deliver. The case flashed vividly through his mind now, for he was convinced that Jody's pelvis was also too narrow for normal delivery. Remembering that the operation had been called a Caesarian section, he tried to recall each step of the procedure and hoped his memory would be accurate. So much time had elapsed since then, he feared that he would not remember enough to successfully perform such an operation on Jody, should the need arise. Fervently he hoped that it would not, for at best it would be a gamble, and he had no wish to gamble with Jody's life. The very thought almost unnerved him.

Hearing Jody scream, Dave pushed by Mammy Lou and hurried into the bedroom, hoping to find her condition not as critical as he feared.

"Hush, sweetheart, it's going to be all right," he murmured, bending over her and pushing the damp hair away from her pale face.

"Dave?" Jody whispered faintly as she tried to focus her blurred eyes on his face.

"Yes, Jody—I'm right here," he answered tenderly.

Mammy Lou pushed a chair over by the bed and Dave sat down. Sheets of rain fell noisily against the window-pane, and a blinding streak of lightning briefly illuminated the room.

With effort, Jody raised her frail hand and softly touched Dave's face with her fingertips, as if to make sure that it was really he and not an illusion.

"You're always here when I need you the most. Somehow you just seem to know," she murmured gratefully.

"How could I not know, my love, when you are so much a part of me?" he answered huskily.

Suddenly the racking labor pains returned, and Jody became acutely embarrassed by Dave's presence. With sheer determination, she stifled a cry and somehow managed to keep herself from doubling up in agony. He must not see me cry, she thought numbly, chiding herself for being such a baby. Childbirth, after all, was the most natural thing in the world. Her determination, however, could not hide the frown that creased her forehead or the sudden fear which appeared in her glazed eyes.

"Are you in much pain, dearest?" Dave asked with as much calmness as possible, certainly more than he was feeling at the moment.

"No, not much," she lied. Oh, why couldn't he just leave? she wondered. Didn't he realize that no woman relishes the thought of a man's seeing her in such a revealing predicament? How could she ever face him again if he should see her raving like a lunatic? Finally the pain subsided a little and her breathing became more regular.

"Dave—John is—John is dead," she whispered brokenly.

"I know, my love. Lemme told me all about it on the way out here. You mustn't think about that now. The main thing right now is you and that fine baby you're going to have."

"But it was my fault, all my fault. We quarreled this morning, and I—I told him I wanted a divorce. Had he not been quite so upset, the accident might never have happened. It's as though I killed him."

"Nonsense, Jody. Lemme told me that the cinch on the saddle apparently slipped, so how can you blame yourself for that? It would have happened whether you had quarreled with him or not."

"Oh, Dave, if only I could believe that—"

"You *must* believe it, otherwise you'll make yourself miserable for the rest of your life, and I won't have that. We've too many happy years ahead of us."

She smiled weakly at him, trying to convince herself that he was right. One thing was for certain—she was finally free; free of John, free of worry and fear, free of everything—everything except the excruciating pain that was beginning to take over her tired body again.

The pains were so sharp now that she involuntarily wrenched her hand from Dave's and writhed in agony. Dave jumped to his feet, overturning his chair as he did so. Putting his hand on her swollen abdomen, he could feel the contractions as the child within sought to free itself from its mother's womb.

"Listen to me, Jody. Can you understand me?" he asked, trying to recapture her attention.

"Yes, yes I hear you. Oh, Dave, please go. I don't want you to see me like this," she managed to get out through clenched teeth.

"No, I'm not going, and you must listen to me carefully. The doctor can't come—he's out of town. Honey, I've never mentioned this to you before, because it never seemed important until now. I studied medicine a long time ago, and I think I still remember enough to help you now, if you'll let me. Will you trust me?" he asked urgently.

Jody looked at him with surprise. How was it possible to love someone so much and yet know so little about him? The racking pains increased and she tossed back and forth.

"Will you trust me?" Dave repeated anxiously.

"Yes, yes—only help me. Please help me!" she screamed.

"I'm going to, my darling. Just believe in me," he murmured with a relieved sigh.

"Mammy Lou, get me a couple of towels or sheets, then go downstairs and tell Doshe to heat up a large kettle of water. See if you can find some whisky, too. If you can't, bring some wine. Oh, and I'll need a sharp razor, needle, thread, ball of twine, another washbasin and more towels. Get a move on now—there's no time to lose," he ordered sternly.

"Yas'suh, ah is on de way," replied the old Negro with a mixture of admiration and gratitude. At that moment Dave could have passed for the Almighty himself as far as Mammy Lou was concerned, so great was her relief.

Dave took the two sheets that Mammy Lou handed him and quickly tied them to the posts at the foot of the bed. "Now, Jody, take hold of these and pull as hard as you can. Try to bear down," he commanded.

Jody grabbed the twisted ends of the sheets, trying to obey, but it was an effort which taxed all of her remaining strength. "Oh Dave, I can't bear for you to see me like this," she sobbed pathetically. "You shouldn't even be in here—it's humiliating."

"There's nothing for you to be ashamed of in having a baby, dearest. Would you be embarrassed if Doc Blanks were here?"

"No, but that's different. He's a doctor, and I—I don't love him," she replied weakly.

"Then that's all the more reason why you shouldn't mind my helping you. Don't you see that in a way you're making this baby part mine, just by letting me help you bring him into the world," he reasoned persistently.

The pains were constant now, one running into another. There was no let-up, and Dave knew that her strength was failing fast. He also knew what he had to do, for his fears were confirmed—Jody's pelvis was too small for the child to pass through.

After what seemed an eternity to him, Mammy Lou returned, laden with all the items he had requested. Doshe was right behind her with the kettle of boiled water.

"Heah t'is, Mist' Dave, an' heah am de whisky jes' lak yo' ask't fo'," Mammy Lou informed him breathlessly.

"Good. Thank God you found some!" he exclaimed gratefully.

"Yas'suh, an' ah brung dis extra glass fo' yo'. Miss Jody mought needs dat whisky, but ah specks yo'll need a mite ob it, too, befo' de nite am ober," she commented with a wide grin.

Dave was thankful for Mammy Lou's insight. He needed something to steady his shaky nerves, and he needed it badly. Pouring himself a stiff drink, he tossed it down and set the glass aside. As the fiery liquid settled in his stomach, his tight muscles slowly relaxed and his mind cleared. After he had sterilized the razor and the needle and had thoroughly scrubbed himself, he walked over to the bed and gently pulled back the sheet.

"No! I don't want you to see me like this. Oh, *please go away!* Don't you see I'm going to die anyway? There's nothing you or anyone can do for me," Jody cried bitterly.

The words tore at Dave's heart, for he knew that she might be right. His knowledge, he knew, was limited, and inwardly he feared that he might fail her. The price could be Jody's life, as well as that of the baby. Shaking such morbid thoughts from his mind, he bent over her twisting body.

"Jody, you're not going to die, but you've got to help me. Your pelvis is too small for the baby to pass through. The only way it can be born is by a Caesarean section."

"Caesarean?" she repeated bewilderedly.

"That's right. Dearest, you know I don't want to hurt you, but—there will be some pain. Now drink this whisky Mammy Lou has poured for you. It'll relax you some and then we'll begin.

Longing to escape the pain, Jody forced down the obnoxious-smelling drink in one big gulp.

"Now, sweetheart, lie back and try to go to sleep. You won't feel the pain so much that way."

"Yes, that's what I want—just to sleep. I'm so tired, so very tired," she murmured weakly as Mammy Lou gently wiped her damp forehead with a washcloth. After a few minutes the whisky took effect, and as the pains subsided,

she drifted off into a fitful sleep. Dave knew he had to work quickly. After Doshe had followed his orders and prepared Jody for the operation, he picked up the scalded razor. Hesitating for only a moment, he humbly prayed for guidance; then he began.

As the razor cut into Jody's flesh, she awakened with a start. Fear swept over her pale face as she struggled to free herself from Mammy Lou's strong arms. She screamed once in hysterical pain, then sank into unconsciousness.

Slowly and carefully, Dave continued to make a long slit in the abdominal wall and the uterus. As he pulled back the flaps of skin, the baby came into view. Fear shot through him like a dagger, and beads of perspiration popped out on his forehead as he hesitated in uncertainty. The baby looked so small and helpless that, for a moment, he was afraid to even touch it. Mammy Lou and Doshe stood nearby, their eyes as large as saucers, for they had never before witnessed anything like this.

Carefully Dave took hold of the baby and gently freed it from the uterus. After cutting the cord, he held the baby by its feet and gave it a sharp swat on the rear. An angry wail pierced the still room, as if the child were protesting the rough treatment it was receiving.

"Lawsy me, hit am uh fine boy, Mist' Dave. Uh fine boy!" Mammy Lou exclaimed proudly, and tears of happiness glistened in her excited eyes.

"Thank God!" Dave whispered hoarsely. Then he handed the baby to Doshe and turned back to Jody. With shaky hands he began to sew up the incision. Through some miracle, he had completed the operation and he knew, with a sense of overwhelming relief, that both mother and child were going to be fine. For the first time he was thankful for the medical training he had received so long ago—but he was even more thankful that he had never become a doctor!

Alone with Jody at last, Dave looked down at her childlike face as she slept. He, and he alone, knew just how close he had come to losing her, and the realization shook him to his very depths. He knew he could never

love anyone as much as he loved this woman, for he loved her more than life itself. Slowly he sank down on the bed and took her small hand in his. For the first time since he had been a small boy, tears rolled down his cheeks. The storm outside had subsided and, once again, another day was born.

Chapter XXV

The bright summer sun glared down unmercifully on the still afternoon, devoid of relief from the unrelenting heat. A breeze occasionally stirred as if to break the spell, then fluttered into nothingness.

Jody sat on the veranda rocking the drowsy baby, whom she had named Theodore, a name which was quickly shortened to Tad. Nearby a pickaninny stood humming to himself, slowly flapping a palmetto fan over his mistress as she looked out over the vast cotton fields which were now dotted with white as far as the eye could see. From the far-off distance, she could hear the familiar spirituals coming from the field hands who were deftly picking the bolls and throwing them into white cotton sacks which, hitched over their shoulders, were dragging the ground. Their black flesh glistened with sweat as the sun beat down on their tired bodies, scorching the very ground on which they trod.

Watching them thoughtfully, a feeling of pity welled up in Jody, and she found herself wondering how any human being could endure such hardships. Yet she was comforted by the fact that slaves on Belle Glen fared much better than many of their kind on other plantations. One might believe that most of them were even reasonably

happy as they toiled in the hot fields, she thought with satisfaction, otherwise they would not be singing.

She sometimes envied them a little, for a Negro's life was a relatively simple one, free of the many problems which burdened their owners. At the earliest age, each slave was trained to serve his master who, in turn, clothed, fed and sheltered him. If one were sick, he was tended to by the mistress or the overseer, providing he was fortunate enough to have a good master. Some were not, however, and when felled by illness, they were left in their dark, damp cabins to face a losing battle with death. The ruthless looked on them as animals and treated them as such, breeding them like cattle and selling the offspring for exorbitant prices, heedless of the pain felt by those whose families were separated. Luckily, this was the exception rather than the rule. Most plantation owners who bought slaves to work in the fields or to have as house servants preferred to keep them relatively happy and well fed, realizing that a well-treated slave was worth ten mistreated ones. Still, most owners did not give in to pampering them, for fear of spoiling them or giving them uppity notions. It was a delicate situation and many slaveowners ruled with an iron hand, or a handy whip whenever the need arose.

This method had never been necessary at Belle Glen, however. In fact, Jody could not remember any of them ever being flogged or mistreated in any way by her father, Dave, or Jamie. Encouragement and praise had been used, rather than mistreatment and brutality, and this method had proved to be most effective. At the end of each day, the field hands anxiously waited to see which croker-sack held the most cotton, for the winner was rewarded with a chaw of tobacco or a larger portion of the food rations which were handed out daily at the kitchen door. If the worker were especially lucky, he might even receive some chittlins from one of the recently butchered hogs which were hanging in the smokehouse. It was a game to them and, as they eagerly lined up at the kitchen door each evening, a look of happy anticipation always spread over their black faces.

No, their lives were not easy, Jody decided vexedly, but at least their problems were far less complicated than her own. At least none of them had to worry about where the next dollar was coming from with which to buy food, a problem which Jody worried about continuously, for money was still scarce. The depression continued to hang over the country with foreboding gloom, and now that she was alone, she often felt bewildered as to how they were going to survive at Belle Glen.

She stubbornly refused to ask Dave for help, though she knew he would have given it gladly. Her sense of guilt over John's death, coupled with her embarrassment over Dave's involvement with Tad's birth, had made it impossible for her to feel at ease with him thereafter. At first, Dave had attributed her unusual behavior to the ordeal she had undergone; but when her coolness to him persisted, patience gave way to anger and he stopped calling on her altogether, hoping that she would eventually come to her senses.

Now a tired sigh escaped her lips as she sought to put him from her mind, and it was at that moment Mammy Lou spotted her from the front window. A moment later she was waddling out to the veranda with a pitcher of cool tea.

Jody looked lovingly at Tad as Mammy Lou gathered him in her arms and started for the door. Her look of tenderness changed to a grimace as she heard the faint sound of an approaching carriage.

"I believe that's Mr. Steve and Miss Emily coming up the drive. Can you tell, Mammy Lou?"

Mammy Lou shaded her eyes with her free hand and peered across the lawn. "Yas'm, ah specks hit is aw'rat. Humph! 'Bout time yo' had sum callers," she declared as she shuffled into the house. "Ah'll bring sum mo' tea out heah directly," she tossed over her shoulder before she trudged upstairs with Tad.

Jody had politely but firmly refused to see any callers ever since John's death, her excuse being that she simply was not feeling well enough to come downstairs to receive visitors. Now that her neighbors had spotted her on the

veranda, no retreat was possible, and with a resigned smile she stood up to greet them.

After the greetings had been made and Mammy Lou had brought out the refreshments, Emily jumped excitedly into the latest tidbits of gossip. Closing his eyes, Steve leaned back in the tall wicker chair with an air of ill-concealed boredom. To Jody's surprise, however, she was actually enjoying their visit, which proved that she had perhaps shut herself away from the world too long. With a contented sigh, she relaxed in her rocker and listened to Emily rattle on as she sipped her tea.

"Oh, my dear, most folks have been utterly wiped out by this dreadful depression. Why, only last month, the Thompsons had to sell their place and move up North. Can you imagine such a horrible thing? Why, I'd rather be dead than have to live up there with all those heathens!" she declared.

"Now, Em, those folks up there are no more heathen than we are. In fact, I daresay the North is pretty much like the South, 'cept that it's a mite colder in the winter," Steve gently chided.

Emily put on a pretty pout and eyed her husband somewhat resentfully. It was not often that Steve disagreed with her in front of others and, now that he had, she felt a little vexed with him.

Sensing her irritation, Jody wisely changed the subject to a much safer one.

"How is little Miles, and why didn't you bring him with you today?"

Disappointed that her news had not interested Jody, Emily's face puckered. "Oh, you know Miss Bert—she can't stand to have Miles out of her sight for ten minutes. I declare, you'd think he was the only one in the world who mattered to her. She's positively spoiling him rotten!"

"Emily, you mustn't feel that way. Miss Bert has always been fond of children, so it's just natural she would dote on her only grandchild," Jody gently reprimanded.

"Well, I hope she's got room in her matronly heart for one more," Emily replied slyly, casting a proud look at Steve.

"Good heavens, you don't mean that—" Jody stopped and looked from Emily to Steve.

Now that Emily had finally succeeded in arousing Jody's curiosity, she sat back and smiled with satisfaction. "Well, I know I shouldn't have let the cat out of the bag this soon, but I'm just so happy I could burst!" she exclaimed.

Steve laughed and looked fondly at his childish wife. "Honestly, Em, you are the beatenest! I thought you weren't going to tell anyone for a while."

"Well, I just had to tell someone, and you know that Jody is my very dearest friend."

"Why, I'm so glad you did tell me, Emily, and I promise your secret will be safe with me."

"Oh, speaking of secrets, I just knew there was something else I had to tell you. You'll never believe this, Jody! Just guess who I saw in town yesterday, and guess who *he* was with?" Emily asked with renewed excitement.

"I'm afraid I haven't the slightest idea," laughed Jody.

"Dave Devan! And guess who he had on his arm?" Emily said with a pleased smile.

"I'm sure I don't know," Jody answered softly, her smile disappearing.

"Camilla Caldwell, of all people!" Emily exclaimed triumphantly.

"Good Lord, Emily, why must you always make a mountain out of a molehill? Just because Dave escorts a lady across the street doesn't mean he's going to marry her," Steve declared impatiently.

"Well, I just wouldn't be too sure of that. Everyone knows that whenever he isn't at the mill, he's at the Caldwells' place," his wife retorted. She obviously did not appreciate Steve's minimizing her newest discovery. Steve, however, was not going to be silenced.

"Which doesn't happen to be too often, my dear. Besides, I personally know that Dave goes there mostly on business. He's been trying to buy some more timberland from Tom Caldwell."

Jody noticed that Steve had said *mostly* on business, and suddenly she felt as though the breath had been

knocked out of her. Camilla was one of the town's most popular belles, as well as one of its most accomplished flirts. What if Dave had become interested in her? In fact, what if he intended to marry her? The thought completely unnerved Jody, and it was only by sheer determination that she was able to sit quietly, with a forced smile, and listen to Emily prattle on. If only they would leave, she thought, and then wondered whatever possessed her to sit on the porch today anyway. She had been right all along—she was not ready to face the outside world yet, and certainly not any news like this.

As sadness clouded Jody's lovely eyes, Steve immediately noticed the change in her expression. Suddenly he felt sorry for her and wished that there were some way he could ease her mind.

"Well, everyone says Camilla has definitely set her bonnet for him, and you know how determined Camilla can be! Why, she could have most any man in the county, so I certainly can't imagine Mr. Devan withstanding her charms," Emily said primly.

"Good heavens, Emily! Why don't you mind your own business?" Steve exclaimed crossly.

"Mr. Blake! Why, I never!" fluttered Emily, at a loss for words. Steve seldom spoke sharply to her, and certainly never in front of friends.

Seeing Emily's hurt expression, Steve immediately regretted his outburst. "I'm sorry, my dear. But I really think you're making too much out of the situation. Dave has been working far too hard at the mill lately, and I'm quite sure that even his visits to the Caldwells are purely business."

"Well, I happen to know that Mr. Devan escorted Camilla to the Johnsons' barbecue just last week. Now pray tell me *that* was just business!"

With an inward groan, Steve groped for something he could say to ease Jody's apparent discomfort. Damn Emily, anyway! She's really let the cat out of the bag this time, he thought miserably.

"My dear Emily, if I had thought of marrying every girl I escorted to a barbecue, I wouldn't be fortunate

enough to have you as my wife now. What's more, I don't believe Dave is contemplating matrimony at the moment. After all, it's only been a year since he lost Cheryl. Forgive me, Jody. I didn't intend to bring up unpleasant memories."

"It's all right, Steve. How is Dave, anyway?" Jody asked as casually as she could.

"Not too well, I'm afraid. He's working too hard, and the strain is beginning to show on him. I've tried to get him to slow down, but you know how stubborn he is."

"Yes—I know," Jody murmured as she looked down at her hands.

Emily had completely forgotten that Dave had been married to Jody's sister, and now that Steve had indirectly reminded her, she was thoroughly embarrassed by her blunder. "Jody—I forgot that Dave was your brother-in-law. Can you ever forgive me for being so thoughtless?"

"There's nothing to forgive, Emily. It's only natural that Dave find—someone else eventually. I would hardly expect him to do otherwise," she answered softly.

"Well, we'd better be getting back, or we'll miss supper, Emily," said Steve, rising to go. Seeing the unmasked anguish in Jody's eyes, he fervently wished they had not come at all. It was obvious that Jody loved Dave just as much as Dave loved her, but somehow things had not worked out for them. It was true that Dave had been seeing a lot of Camilla, but Steve had hoped it would blow over before Jody got wind of it. Now, thanks to his wife, she knew. At that moment he could have wrung Emily's foolish neck. Grabbing her firmly by the arm, Steve ushered his bewildered wife to the carriage.

"Come to visit us soon, Jody. We miss seeing you," Steve called back to her as he hastily waved goodbye and drove off in a cloud of dust.

Jody stood on the steps and watched them until the carriage was out of sight. So, she thought bitterly, Dave was interested in Camilla Caldwell. John had apparently been right all along. Dave had never really loved her, but only used her to satisfy his lust. What a fool she had been to ever think otherwise! Well, if he wanted Camilla as a

wife, he was more than welcome to her, just as long as the both of them stayed out of her way. She could do very well without the likes of Dave Devan, she silently vowed; but even as she tried to convince herself of this, a wave of longing engulfed her, and suddenly the future seemed very empty.

Chapter XXVI

Maude Miller pulled her carriage to a halt in front of the veranda at Belle Glen. Handing the reins to Lemme, she clumsily alighted and shuffled up the wide steps. Hesitating at the front door for an instant, she raised her gnarled hand and knocked. She still did not feel quite right about paying a visit to a real fine lady such as Miss Jody, for it seemed to put her on an equal footing socially with the girl, and Maude knew she was not, nor would she ever be.

"It just ain't fittin'," she muttered to herself while she waited for the door to be opened. Yet she knew that Jody would not have had it any other way. It was evident that the girl went out of her way to make her feel at ease whenever she visited Belle Glen, and she knew Jody's welcome was sincere and not merely politeness. In a short period of time, she had grown quite fond of Jody, which was extraordinary for Maude, for she did not take to people easily.

Raised on a Mississippi shantyboat, Maude learned the hard knocks of life at an early age, a lesson she never forgot. There were only a few whom she liked, much less trusted. Jody, however, was one of those few, second only to Dave. As a doting mother schemes to bring about a desirable match for her offspring, Maude strongly desired a

match between Jody and Dave. Her shrewd eyes had missed nothing and, having long ago come to the conclusion that they loved each other, she wondered why they had not been able to come to an understanding; in fact, they seemed to be drawing further apart. Why Dave should now pay so much attention to that scatterbrained Caldwell girl was more than she could comprehend, and it was all she could do not to voice her opinion on the subject. She was equally provoked with Jody, who was doing nothing to encourage Dave, as far as she could tell. Didn't she realize she was all but handing him to Camilla on a silver platter? Well, it was high time that someone set matters straight, she decided, and apparently it was going to have to be her! Squaring her broad shoulders, she followed Mammy Lou into the parlor, a grim look of determination on her swarthy face.

"Why Maude, how nice to see you," Jody remarked warmly.

"Howdy, Miss Jody. I jest come out to bring you the wage money for them darkies."

"Oh yes. Well, sit down and Mammy Lou will bring us some tea."

Usually, Maude would have declined the invitation, but today she had things to say to the young girl; things which she rather doubted Jody would like hearing. Nevertheless, she was determined to have her say here and now, as there certainly was no time to lose. Handing the money to Jody, she sat uncomfortably on the edge of a delicate rosewood chair.

"There must be some mistake, Maude. Why, there's far too much money here!" Jody declared after glancing at the money in her small hand.

"No'm, there ain't no mistake. That's what Mr. Dave give me to bring you."

"But—but this is enough to pay for twice the number of slaves he's hiring from me. I'm sure it's a mistake," Jody said reluctantly, wishing that Dave did owe her that much. Then she would have had enough to pay the mortgage note that was due.

"Well, I'm supposed to tell you the value on them

black devils is gone up agin, jest like before," Maude answered slyly.

"Why, what do you mean? Maude, are you trying to tell me that the value hasn't gone up? That folks are still paying the same as always for hired slaves?"

"Miss Jody, them blacks are worth jest the same as they wuz when Mr. Dave first hired 'em. In fact, most of 'em ain't worth that, considering the trouble a body's got to go to jest to git 'em off their—their backsides!"

"But I don't understand. Why would Dave pay me so much more than they're worth, if he doesn't even need them?"

Maude surveyed her puzzled friend for a moment and immediately decided it was time someone opened those innocent eyes.

"You know, sometimes a body stands so close to the forest that he can't see none of the trees. It appears to me like you're one of 'em right now! Excuse me, Miss Jody, but jest why in blazes do you think he's a-paying you them high wages?"

Embarrassed and bewildered, Jody glanced down at her hands. "I'm sure I haven't any idea," she murmured.

"Oh, you ain't, huh?" snorted Maude. "Well, it's pretty plain to me. What would you say if'n I wuz to tell you that Mr. Dave owns the mortgage on this here place, instead of Mr. Blake?"

"Why—why, I wouldn't believe you! Why on earth would he buy the mortgage from Mr. Blake? I'm sure he doesn't want Belle Glen. Besides, the only way I'm able to pay on the note at all is with the money that Dave is paying me for the slaves."

"I guessed as much, but you got one thing kinda turned around. Mr. Blake never did own no mortgage on this place."

Jody collapsed into a nearby chair, completely stunned. "Are you trying to tell me that Mr. Devan has owned the mortgage on Belle Glen all along?"

Maude was slightly amused at Jody's referring to Dave as "Mr. Devan." Scratching her head, she gruffly answered Jody's question. "That's about the size of it, only I

ain't supposed to know nothing about it neither. I jest happened to run across the papers one day when I wuz straightening up Mr. Dave's desk. I 'spects he'd have my hide if'n he knowed I wuz a-tellin' you about it," she replied.

"But that—that means that he's been paying off his own mortgage! Why would he do such a thing?"

"Well, if'n you don't know by now, they ain't no one that kin tell you. Jest put two and two together, an' it's as plain as the nose on yer face! Hells bells, why do you think he'd take a mortgage he don't need and pay twice the amount for a passel of blacks that he don't need neither, jest so's you kin buy back your mortgage?" snorted Maude.

"He's done all this for me, and yet I—I've treated him so . . . Oh Maude, I've been such a fool, and now it's too late!" Jody cried, covering her face with her hands.

"No'm, it ain't too late yit—but it will be if'n you keeps on like you're a-going."

"But he's interested in Camilla Caldwell now, and after the way I've acted, I can't really blame him. Oh Maude, what am I going to do?" wailed Jody in despair.

Maude rose and walked over to her. Gently she laid her rough hand on Jody's bent head. "Miss Jody, he don't care nothing about that there gal. I 'spects the only reason he sees her a'tall is jest to keep from being so doggone lonely. He's been working like the devil his'self wuz after him, an' he looks like he's jest about tuckered out. If'n ya'll don't makes up pretty soon, that pore man is a-going to work his'self to death, or else do some fool thing like marrying up with that scatterbrained ninny! A man like Mr. Dave jest naturally needs a woman to look after him."

Jody looked up at Maude and smiled gratefully. "Thank you, Maude. I only hope I'm not too late."

"What you aimin' to do?" Maude asked curiously.

Jody got to her feet and walked with Maude to the front door. "Why, I guess I had better start by inviting him over, but I mustn't appear too anxious," she said thoughtfully.

"Well, why don't I jest tell him that you got to see him on business?" Maude suggested.

"Good. In fact, ask him if he would ride over to see me tomorrow."

"Now you're a-thinkin'. An' Miss Jody, I knows you're still in mournin', but don'tcha have something else to wear that's a little more fetchin'?" Maude asked bluntly.

"I'll see what I can find, though heaven knows I haven't much to choose from," laughed Jody.

Standing on the porch steps, Jody waved goodbye as Maude drove off. Then she turned and walked briskly back into the house. What reason could she give Dave for asking him to come, she wondered. And if he did come, what on earth would she wear? It had been ages since she had bought any new clothes. The black dress she was wearing was noticeably shabby, as were all of her other clothes. Jody suddenly remembered the black bombazine riding habit that was packed away in a trunk upstairs, and immediately both questions were answered. She would wear the stunning riding habit, and she would ask Dave to inspect the fields with her, just as they had inspected them together so many times in the past.

For the first time in months Jody was happy; she felt almost like a young girl again. If only the hours would pass quickly and tomorrow would come! But no matter—she had waited seven years for Dave, and if necessary she would wait for the rest of her life. She fearfully wondered if she had waited too long, and the thought caused her smile to fade. Suddenly it seemed as though tomorrow would never come.

Dave had been pleasantly surprised when Maude informed him that Jody wished to see him the next day. He then chided himself for being a fool. Maude had told him that Jody needed to go over some business matters with him, and what, after all, could be more natural than that? Before Jody married, he had often helped her with matters at Belle Glen, so it seemed only natural that she should seek his advice again. Ever since John's death, she had made it quite clear that she had no desire to share his

company, or his love. Therefore it was obvious that her only reason for wanting to see him now was business.

Somewhere along the way, he had lost Jody's love and respect; otherwise, she would never have shut him out of her life so completely. Shut him out, that is, until now. The irony of it was that Jody still valued his advice; yet she did not want the love and protection which he so desperately wanted to give her.

Out of desperation and loneliness, he had finally sought Camilla Caldwell's company, although his first few encounters with her had been not of his own making. She had always managed to be present whenever he went over to discuss that tract of timber land with her father; and on several occasions, Camilla's brother, Charles, had insisted on his dining with the family. Charles and Camilla were twins, but there the resemblance ended. Dave sometimes wondered how two people could look so alike yet be so different. Whereas Camilla was vivacious, flighty and scatterbrained (or so she pretended), Charles was quiet, serious and dependable. Dave regarded him as a close friend, so he certainly had no wish to deceive Camilla about his intentions toward her.

Knowing that he was not in love with Camilla, Dave at first had tried to be courteous but aloof to the girl. Camilla's interest in him, however, had not been daunted in the least by his remoteness, and her intentions soon became quite clear. She flirted outrageously with him whenever she got the opportunity, and she made sure that those occasions were frequent. Whether Dave visited Windemere on business with Tom, or even on a social visit with Charles, he was always forced to share Camilla's company. It seemed almost like a family conspiracy.

At first Dave had been amused by Camilla's willful and flattering attention; then his amusement turned to gratitude and an actual fondness for the pretty girl. Jody's coldness towards him had dealt his ego a damaging blow, and now Camilla's infatuation with him acted as a soothing ointment to his bruised pride.

He did not fool himself into thinking that he loved Camilla. He doubted seriously that he could ever love any-

one but Jody. But he was tired of the void in which he had been living. His life had consisted of working at the mill and occasionally visiting Windemere. He had even avoided visiting Steve and Emily. Their home life always seemed so complete that Dave could not help but envy their happiness whenever he was around them. He was acutely aware that, had he married Jody rather than Cheryl, he would probably be enjoying a happy home life of his own right now. And his desire for such happiness was still so strong that he had even contemplated marrying Camilla, but inevitably his thoughts always returned to Jody.

As Dave approached Belle Glen, his heart sank to new depths of despair. He wondered how he could possibly bear to be near Jody again without taking her in his arms. How could he keep his desire for her from betraying him? Nonetheless, he was determined that he would not give her the opportunity to rebuff him again.

As he rode up to the house, he saw her standing on the veranda and realized that she was waiting for him. For a moment, it seemed to him that the past seven years had never existed. There she stood, as lovely as she had been at sixteen. No, she was even lovelier, he decided, for she was no longer a young, gauche girl, but a mature and very desirable young woman.

Lithely dismounting, he quickly tried to take in every detail of her appearance, firmly etching her memory in his lonely mind. Her dark, glossy hair was caught loosely in a black net, and he noted that she was wearing the attractive black riding habit which he had always liked on her. A lacy white ascot touched off the V-neck collar of the snug-fitting basque, thus accentuating the creaminess of her flawless complexion. His gaze fastened on her mouth as she came down the steps to greet him.

"Hello, Dave. It's—it's good to see you again. I do appreciate your coming," she murmured hesitantly.

"Maude said you needed to see me on some matters of business. I hope that I can be of assistance," he answered somewhat stiffly, then added, "How have you been, Jody?"

Taken back by his aloofness, she was suddenly aware of the coldness in his stare. Clearing her throat, she assured him she was fine, then gratefully turned towards Lemme who was leading her mount to the hitching post. Thanking him, she reluctantly faced Dave again.

"I thought we might ride over the place and see what repairs need to be made. I'm afraid my finances are rather limited, so it's necessary that only the most important repairs be made right now. Frankly, I'm at a loss as to which ones should come first. I thought your judgment might be a little better than mine. That's—that's why I asked you to come," she finished nervously.

"Is it indeed?" he remarked sarcastically. "And I dared to hope that you had missed me."

Jody longed to tell him just how much she had missed him, but his attitude towards her seemed so cynical, so remote, that the words refused to come.

For more than an hour they rode over the sprawling acres, but aside from deciding upon needed repairs, little was discussed. Conversation was not easy, for it seemed that an invisible wall had been erected between them, even as both were reminded of the many times they had ridden together over the same ground in the past.

As they approached the stretch of woods where Jody had encountered the rattlesnake several years before, she reined in her horse and, turning to Dave, shyly asked if they might ride down to the pond and water the horses.

Dave threw her a quizzical glance, then nodded his agreement. Damn her, he thought miserably, didn't she realize that he had no desire to go anyplace which reminded him of the past? Didn't she realize that being alone with her in such a secluded place might tempt him beyond his endurance, causing him to do something which they both might later regret? But looking at her, he could see that she did not and an exasperated sigh escaped his lips as he followed her lead.

The woods were ablaze in their autumn splendor, and a crisp smell of fall permeated the October air. Nimbly the horses picked their way down the leaf-strewn path, and as

the sunlight sifted through the treetops, a feeling of tranquility settled over the quiet forest.

Once the pond was reached, Dave dismounted, then walked over to assist Jody. As she bent down to meet his outstretched arms, a low branch caught her hairnet, jerking it free so that her hair cascaded softly around her slim shoulders. Seeing her in such lovely disarray, Dave was reminded of the other time he had seen her thus—the day of the tornado, when he had held her so close to him, possessing her wholly.

For a moment, neither spoke as their eyes met and held, then Jody, unable to meet his gaze longer, turned and walked over to the gnarled oak tree. Leaning against it, she sought some way of breaking the awkward silence.

"It's still lovely here, isn't it?" she murmured at last.

Dave's breath caught in his throat as he watched her, and he knew that his endurance had reached the breaking point. He wanted her and was tired of playing cat and mouse, tired of pretending an indifference towards her which he was far from feeling. The look in her eyes bespoke her love for him far better than words ever could have; yet this was not enough for him. He was determined to make her come all the way to him. There could be no doubts between them this time, for he knew that if he held her in his arms now, no power on earth would ever make him let her go from him again. Slowly he walked over to her and pinned her to the tree with his powerful arms on either side of her.

"Now what's this all about, Jody? Why did you really send for me?"

"I told you, I—I needed your advice," she stammered weakly, nervousness creeping up her spine as she glued her eyes to the buttons on his shirt.

Forcing her chin up with his forefinger, he studied her for a moment, reveling in the heady sensation of her nearness.

"Oh, and that was the only reason, was it?" he remarked diabolically, one dark brow quirked with obvious skepticism.

Unable to bear his penetrating gaze any longer, Jody jerked away from him and walked somewhat unsteadily towards the edge of the pond. Misunderstanding his motive, she felt that he was mocking her, chiding her for loving him, and anger suddenly welled up in her as her eyes filled with unshed tears.

"I—I'm sorry now that I troubled you," she murmured huskily. "I should have realized that you probably have more pressing matters to attend to, without having to listen to my problems."

A sudden fury swept over Dave, and he had to fight an overwhelming desire to shake her until her teeth rattled.

"As you say, I am rather pressed for time, so let's stop evading the issue," he answered shortly. "I repeat—*why did you send for me?*"

Anger flashed in her jade-green eyes as she whirled around to face him. Trembling, she glared at him defiantly.

"I needed your help and advice and I—I *thought* you would be glad to give it. Apparently I was mistaken. It's getting late and I'm sure you're eager to get back to Camilla Caldwell, so I won't detain you longer," she retorted angrily. But as she attempted to walk by him, Dave caught her arm and jerked her to him.

"So you know about Camilla, do you?" he taunted meanly.

Seeing the mockery in his face, she could have gladly killed him in her fury.

"Yes, I know about her—as does everyone else, apparently. Now, *let go of me!*" she gritted between clenched teeth.

"When I get good and ready, I will," he answered softly, amusement quirking the corner of his mouth as he cupped her chin in his hand. "You know, my love, jealousy quite becomes you."

"Jealousy! Why you—you—" she sputtered furiously as she tried to jerk free of him, but his grip only tightened on her, crushing her to his broad chest.

"Say it, damn it—say it," he muttered thickly, bringing his lips to within inches of her own. "Say you're jealous."

Say you can't bear the thought of me touching another woman, holding her in my arms like I'm holding you. Say it—" he whispered hoarsely as his lips savagely found hers.

He felt her stiffen, but only for a moment, and then she was melting in his arms, hungrily returning his kiss, her own pent-up emotion finally released. Arching her back, she pressed even closer to him as her arms tightened around his neck, causing him to stiffen with desire as he felt the soft thrust of her breasts against his chest.

"Jody—oh, Jody, was it so hard to come to me?" he murmured into the softness of her throat.

"You'll never know just how hard it was," she whispered. "You see, I thought—I thought you didn't really love me."

"Didn't love you! My God, Jody—what must I do to prove it to you?" he exclaimed with exasperation.

"Then why did you stop coming to see me?" she asked tearfully.

"For a time, my girl, you didn't seem exactly overjoyed to have me, you know," he reminded her with a smile.

"Oh Dave, I was so confused after John died. The guilt I felt over his death and the embarrassment I felt every time I remembered that you delivered my baby made it impossible for me feel at ease with you."

"But my dear, you would have died had I not been there to help. Surely you realize that."

"I know, I know—but that still didn't make it any less—" Seeing his amused smile, her arms tightened around him as she buried her face against his chest. "Oh Dave, I've been such a fool! No wonder you turned to Camilla, only—only I thought I had lost you to her," she murmured huskily.

"You'll never lose me sweetheart. Not to Camilla, nor any other woman." He gently kissed her again, as if to dispel the last of her doubts. "I love you with all my heart, you know. Do you think you could put up with me for a lifetime?" he questioned softly, brushing a tear from her cheek.

"Oh, yes—yes!" she whispered joyfully, clinging to him as though she would never let him go. The past could not be relived, nor mistakes undone, but there still was the future. Her future and Dave's!

PART III

1849

Chapter XXVII

By 1844 the country had begun to recover from the depths of the longest depression it had ever experienced, a depression which had lasted for a total of seventy-two months. The next five years witnessed the growth of a young nation, with changes occurring to provide America ample opportunities to further expand and unite her territories. With this expansion, however came discordance, due to the encroachment of foreign powers and the dissension over the slavery issue. It was the latter which caused the delay of several territories' acceptance into the Union, territories such as California.

The Gold Rush had caused a population explosion in California and the need for its territorial organization became urgent, but the territory's stand on slavery became the drawback. When California finally adopted a constitution which prohibited slavery, President Taylor recommended its admission into the Union. Southerners were appalled, since such an admittance would upset the balance of fifteen free states and fifteen slave states in Congress.

Due to the slave question, the danger of dissolution had already begun to hang heavy in the air, posing a threat to America's unity. The melting pot of America was beginning to bubble with hot resentments which, upon erupting, would cause the Union to be ripped apart only twelve

years later. Though concerned, the majority blindly closed their eyes to the potential danger of the situation. It was enough, for the present, that the depression had ended; few were inclined to borrow trouble by worrying about the future.

Dave Devan was no exception, for he, too, was content—content with his newly found happiness with Jody. Casting aside propriety, he had persuaded Jody to marry him only a few short months after her husband's death, an act which for a time set the malicious tongues of Vicksburg to wagging again. Now in 1849, almost nine years later, everyone seemingly had forgotten that Jody had defied convention by marrying Dave while she was still in mourning for her first husband. The Devans, in fact, were considered to be a pillar of society and therefore beyond reproach, for the intervening years had produced some rather remarkable changes at Belle Glen. Due to Dave's shrewd management, the plantation was flourishing as in days of old, making a nice income which, combined with the profits from the mill and various stock investments, had made the Devans quite prosperous—too prosperous for criticism.

But if life was good for Jody and Dave, the years had not been totally without disappointments and, occasionally, grief. The first two years of their marriage had been overshadowed by Jody's fear that the ordeal she had undergone in giving birth to Tad had left her barren. Though Dave had adopted Tad, she could not forget that the child was not of their own love, and more than anything else she wanted to give Dave a child of his own. Not an envious person by nature, she felt envy pierce her heart each time the Blakes visited, for Emily had given birth to a lovely daughter, Beth, the same year that she and Dave were married. Although Jody had been provided ample opportunities in which to conceive a child, she had not.

Dave, for his part, could not have cared less. He had Jody and that was enough, for she was his whole world. When Jamie O'Rourke's wife gave birth to a stillborn child and, two days later, died of childbed fever, he was

more thankful than ever that Jody was seemingly barren. His thankfulness was shortlived; six months later, Jody happily informed him that she was pregnant.

Despite Dave's anxiety over Jody's having another child, her delivery was without complications this time. The baby, a girl, was named after Jamie's beloved wife, Katherine, but it was Jamie's son Bret who quickly altered the name to Kitty. Undoubtedly he saw a resemblance in the infant's dark hair and vivid blue eyes to his most prized possession, a small kitten with identical coloring. Regardless of his father's admonishment, he stubbornly persisted in calling her Kitty. The name was so appropriate that soon everyone was referring to the infant by nickname. Her real name forgotten by all, with the exception of Jamie.

Mammy Lou eyed the narrow, winding staircase which led up to the dark attic on the third floor, then shook her massive head with obvious vexation. She had never been overly fond of dark places, but her misgivings regarding the obscure attic were now minimized by her impatience to get hold of her two mischievous charges, Tad and Kitty. Despite the fact that Jody had given birth to the impetuous youngsters. Mammy Lou considered them to be hers, particularly Kitty, who, at six years of age, held a special place in her heart. The two were quite a handful.

Although she had not actually seen the children going up to the attic, past experience had taught her to always expect the unexpected. The third floor was strictly off-limits to them. Since they could usually be found in the very spots to Tad and Kitty, and therefore a tempting challenge places where they were not supposed to be, and since they obviously were nowhere else in sight, Mammy Lou eyed the third floor suspiciously.

"Miss Kitty an' Mist' Tad, yo' gits yo'self's down heah dis min'it, fo' ah tells yo' ma whar yo' is!" When her threatening bellow failed to bring forth a response, Mammy Lou's frown deepened and she edged closer to the forbidding stairs.

"If'n ah has ter cum af'er yo', ah's a'gwine ter tan sum

bak'sides w'en ah gits a'holt of yo'!" she shouted again, hoping that this would scare the two little culprits out of their hiding place.

Still there was no response. With another irritable shake of her head, Mammy Lou reluctantly began to trudge up the dark stairway, muttering darkly beneath her breath with each step she took.

Upon hearing the stairs creak underneath Mammy Lou's tremendous weight, Kitty and Tad peeped around the attic door and struggled to suppress the laughter which was almost choking them. In spite of her habitual gruffness, both children knew without doubt that they could always twist the trusted old servant around their chubby little fingers. In fact, the closest she had ever come to spanking them was in issuing the empty threat, for she got upset if either of their parents dared to spank their mischievous little hands! So as Mammy Lou waddled up the stairs, her menacing words seemed hilariously funny to the impish youngsters.

It was at that moment that Tad's pet bullfrog, Toady, decided to take matters in hand. Leaping out of Tad's hands, he bounded through the cracked attic door. Too late, Tad saw the frog head for the landing just as Mammy Lou's head popped over the banister. As if to announce his presence, Toady let out a loud croak. Mammy Lou stopped dead in her tracks and dubiously peered through the darkness. As Toady let out another bellow, her eyes widened, and all thoughts of Tad and Kitty completely vanished.

"Who dat?" she whispered fearfully.

An eerie silence hung in the air, causing Mammy Lou to shiver with dismay. "Who dat?" she repeated somewhat louder. Still there was no answer, only silence.

By the time Toady let out his next croak, Mammy Lou's aplomb had completely crumbled.

"Who dat?" she shouted frantically.

Kitty and Tad fought to smother their giggles, immensely enjoying the whole comical scene at the poor old woman's expense. Unable to resist the temptation any longer, Kitty mimicked:

"Who dat!"

Mammy Lou visibly stiffened. "Who dat says who dat, w'en ah says who dat?" she yelled in a wavering voice.

Just then, Toady gave another big leap; but this time, both he and Mammy Lou received a surprise, if not an actual shock. For where should Toady land but right on top of Mammy Lou's head, knocking her red bandanna completely awry!

With a screech that would have awakened the dead, Mammy Lou flapped her large arms over her head and clattered down the stairs, leaving a stunned bullfrog and two hysterical children behind!

It took Mammy Lou several weeks to regain her composure, as well as her dignity. The children lost no time in revealing the little episode to half the slaves on the plantation, as well as to the Blakes, Jamie O'Rourke, and anyone else who happened to be passing by.

The other house servants, especially, got a good laugh out of the rollicking tale, since they had always regarded the old matriarch as not only fearless but completely invincible. It was most gratifying for them to discover that even Mammy Lou had some fear in her. And they certainly had no intention of allowing her to forget about it! Every time she waddled into the kitchen, Doshe and Uncle Thad would look at each other and innocently ask: "Who dat?" Then they would double up with laughter as Mammy Lou indignantly stalked out of the room. So it proved to be quite a humiliating time for the old matriarch, and she spent the next few weeks in silent wrath, muttering outlandish threats under her breath; threats which, of course, she had no intention of executing!

"Look, Kitty, you just can't go with us this time. Bret's going to show me a new cave he found down by the bluff, and that's no place for a little girl to be. No telling what we'll find in there," Tad stated in his most convincing voice. He knew quite well he had better convince Kitty that she did not want to go, or else he would have her tagging along behind them.

He adored his capricious little sister, but there were

times when he found her to be quite trying, and this apparently was going to be one of those times. No one knew better than he what an uncontrollable temper Kitty had whenever she was crossed. It had long ago become his policy to try to persuade her, rather than defy her; for of the two, Kitty had the stronger will, and Tad fully realized it. To disagree with her was to fight a losing battle.

Angrily glaring at Tad, Kitty began tugging at one of her long curls. "I'm not a little girl and don't you call me one either. I can do anything you can, even if you are three years older than me!" she exclaimed huffily.

"But I *can't* take you, Kitty. Bret told me to come alone, and he wouldn't like it if you came along," Tad argued weakly.

Kitty realized that this was probably true, and she momentarily regretted placing her brother in such an uncomfortable predicament. Bret was one of the few friends her brother had, for Tad was unusually shy around most folks; friendship was not a thing which came easily to him. He was not unfriendly, but only unsure of himself, and he invariably seemed to shrink from all but a chosen few. To those who knew him well, however, Tad showed a completely different nature. Although sensitive, he could be quite jovial and boisterous, if not actually mischievous at times. Had it not been for his strong sense of insecurity, Tad would have appeared to be quite a normal nine-year-old boy. Unfortunately, this side was rarely seen by anyone other than his family and closest friends, so most of Tad's classmates considered him to be dull and of no importance. Consequently, he was never included in any of their playful activities. Had it not been for Bret and Kitty, life would have been almost unbearable for Tad.

Still, Kitty resented the implication that she would have to abide by Bret's wishes, since his wishes very seldom included her. This irked her most of all, because try as she might, she never seemed able to capture the older boy's attention for very long. Everyone else always made it a point to coddle her and pay her all kinds of attention, but not Bret. Except for occasionally teasing her, he all but

ignored her, and this was the one thing Kitty simply could not tolerate.

"I don't care if he likes it or not! After all, it's our bluff, not his. He's just the overseer's son, so he can't stop me," she snapped.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that—you've never seen Bret riled up. Why, just before school let out for summer, I saw him beat the tar out of Miles Blake!" exclaimed Tad, hoping to shake Kitty's confidence.

"Why did he do that?" Kitty asked in surprise.

"Well, I didn't hear all of the fuss, but I heard Miles say something about Bret's patched-up trousers, and then Miles called him 'poor white trash'. And that's when Bret let him have it!"

"But his pants do have patches on them, so he is poor, isn't he?" asked Kitty, somewhat puzzled.

"But it's not his fault he's poor. Anyway, he's a long sight from being white trash. Why, he makes the highest marks in school and he can outshoot and outride any boy in town. That's why a lot of the boys don't like him, especially Miles. They're all just jealous," Tad declared loyally.

This information stirred a spark of new admiration in Kitty for her brother's friend. To be liked was one thing, but to be envied was the height of all enjoyment for Kitty! She had never seen Bret in this respect before, and she found this new vision of him to be quite interesting. Curious to learn more about Bret, Kitty became more determined than ever to go along with them. If Tad thought so much of Bret, then there was obviously something about him that she had missed. In any event, nothing and no one must ever come between Tad and her. If she could ever get Bret to include her in their adventures, she felt that there would be no end to the fun the three of them could have!

Deciding to try another approach, Kitty looked pleadingly at her brother, her big blue eyes widening in despair. "Oh please, Tad—please let me go too. I promise I won't be in the way. I'll be so good that Bret won't even know I'm along."

"Well, I don't know, Kitty . . ." Tad said slowly as his resolve began to crumble. It was inconceivable that a six-year-old could have so much determination. Yet her beguilement had its intended effect. In another minute, Tad knew that she would be crying, and he could not bear to see Kitty cry. Her temper tantrums bewildered him, but her tears completely unnerved him.

"Please, Tad, *Please!* I won't be afraid of anything as long as you're there."

This was really stretching the truth. Whereas Kitty had seldom shown fear over anything, Tad had always been easily alarmed. It was he, not Kitty, who still slept with a lamp burning in his room at night.

Hearing her voice such confidence in his ability to protect her, Tad felt his small chest swell with pride, and at that moment he would have undergone anything for his bewitching little sister.

"All right, come on. But remember, stay out of the way and be careful," he said with an air of superiority.

A short time later, Tad was wondering how on earth he was going to explain Kitty's presence to Bret. He really had not intended to bring her along; in fact, he was not too sure why he had. He wondered how Kitty always seemed to make him take her side, when usually he actually did not agree with her at all. Well, maybe Bret would not mind her coming along, just this once.

Unfortunately, Bret did mind, and he did not hesitate to show his displeasure. As he stood there glaring at Kitty with undisguised resentment, Tad marveled at his sister's calmness. He fervently hoped that she would not make matters worse by becoming disagreeable, for Tad had no desire to have to choose sides between his sister and his best friend. The very thought of it completely unnerved him. How could he possibly turn against his own flesh and blood? On the other hand, it was unthinkable that he should ever disagree with Bret on anything, since he not only respected the older boy, but was in complete awe of him.

"We might as well forget it for today, Tad. We can't have Kitty tagging along behind us. She'd just be in the way," Bret finally decided.

"No, I wouldn't, Bret. I promise I wouldn't. I wanna see the cave ever so much, and I promise to be good, really!" Kitty pleaded although it went against her nature to do so.

"It's not that, Kitty. It's just that it'd be too dangerous for a little girl like you to go along. The cave is pretty high up on the bluffs, and the path is awfully narrow. You might fall and hurt yourself. In fact, you could even be killed," Bret patiently explained.

"I wouldn't either! You just don't want me to go 'cause you don't like me. You've never liked me," wailed Kitty, desperately trying to force out a tear.

"Yes I do, Kitty. I just don't want you to get hurt. Now, if I didn't like you, I wouldn't care, would I? Look—when you get bigger, I promise I'll take you along, too. All right?"

"No! I want to go *now*. The cave might not be there later," the small girl sobbed.

"You little goose! Of course it'll still be there. You don't think it's gonna run off, do you?"

Melting at the sight of Kitty's tears, Tad tried to intervene for his little sister. "Bret, I'll look after her. Let her come—please."

"No, and that's final! Besides, your pa would have a fit if she went up there. Now send her home, Tad, or the whole thing is off for today," Bret said with finality.

This was turning out even worse than Tad had expected, for now Bret, as well as Kitty, was getting mad at him. "Kitty, please go on home like a good girl. I'll make it up to you later, I promise," Tad pleaded.

"Oh, all right. I don't want to see your dirty old cave anyway. But just you wait until next week, Bret. I'm gonna have a big birthday party, and I'm gonna tell Mama not to invite you. I'm gonna have lots of cake an' punch, an' watermelon, an' prizes—and you're gonna miss out on all the fun. So there!" Kitty gave the boys one last dirty look, then stamped off—her curls bobbing up and down her rigid little back as she made a regal exit.

"I'm sorry, Bret. She didn't mean that. You know Mama will invite you to the party," Tad apologized.

"It's all right, Tad. I probably wouldn't have come anyway," the older boy answered solemnly.

"Why not? You know the party wouldn't be any fun without you. At least, not for me, it wouldn't."

"Sure it will be, Tad. You see, you belong with all those people, and I don't. I don't even have a decent pair of trousers to wear, and—well, I just don't fit into your group of friends."

"I think you're better than all of them put together. Why, not only can you ride and hunt better than any of them, you're the smartest boy in the whole school. And you're the only boy I know who is taller than his own pa," Tad declared with unconcealed admiration.

"Well, considering my pa's height, I'm afraid that's not saying much. But thanks anyway, Tad," Bret laughed.

"Then you'll come to the party?" the younger boy asked hopefully.

"I don't know. I'll think on it. Now, come on and let's get started. By the way, I've got a couple of cane poles rigged up in the cave. The catfish have been biting pretty good lately along the riverbank. Thought we might get in a little fishing, but you gotta bait your own hook this time."

"That's great, Bret! And Bret—"

"Yeah?"

"I sure do hope you'll come to Kitty's party. You *do* belong, you know."

"No, I don't belong now, Tad, but I will someday. You can count on that," Bret replied seriously as they trudged off towards the river. Little did Tad know that his friend had long ago decided that someday he would be one of the richest men in Vicksburg. The money, however, was not as important to him as the power it represented. He had silently vowed that the day would come when no one would ever laugh at him again, much less exclude him from any of their social functions. He was not sure just how this would come about—he only knew that it had to happen! Even now he considered no price too great to pay for this dream which he secretly nurtured.

Chapter XXVIII

Kitty's party came off in a blaze of glory, and all of the neighboring children gleefully attended—all except Bret. Although Kitty objected violently, Jody had personally handed the boy his invitation. She was slightly perplexed when Bret sent his excuses by one of the pickaninnies just before the first guest arrived.

Bret, however, never ceased to puzzle Jody. He was so unlike Jamie or his mother, Katherine. They were kind people who had always been full of laughter; at least it had been so while Katherine had lived. Even now, Jamie's eyes often twinkled with mirth over the slightest provocation. He was a simple man whose whole life was wrapped up in his son.

There was nothing simple, though, in the nature of Bret. He was the type of youth who seemed never to have been a child, but rather a man who lived in the body of a young boy. He could be jubilant in one instant and impassive in the next, so that one was never quite sure what thoughts were taking place behind those pensive eyes which were constantly alert.

Unlike most sixteen-year-old boys who were extremely tall, Bret never slumped, but walked with his head held high. Already he seemed to dwarf his father whenever they walked side by side. This was one of Bret's fea-

tures of which Jamie was the proudest. Jamie came from a large family—large in number and large in physical size. Of all his brothers, Jamie was the only one who had not reached six feet in height. The runt of the litter, he had always joked; yet the fact had secretly smarted. Jamie's disappointment in his own stature had greatly diminished when it became evident that Bret, at least, would reach the coveted height.

In some inexplicable way, Bret often reminded Jody of Dave. For this reason, the boy held a special place in her heart, even though she could not understand his unpredictable nature. Perhaps it was his unpredictableness which reminded her the most of Dave. Or perhaps it was the boy's tireless determination, which always made him succeed in anything he attempted; succeed and usually surpass all others. Had it not always been so with Dave?

It was, therefore, only natural that her husband had taken a strong liking to the boy. Had it been just a casual friendship, Jody would not have minded so much. But it was not, for Dave found in Bret all of the strong attributes which Tad simply did not possess. He was the son that Dave had always wanted and could never have; all he had was Tad, a poor substitute.

Jody could not admonish Dave for neglecting Tad, for he had repeatedly tried to cement their relationship in every conceivable way. It was unfortunate that his efforts always ended in failure, due to the fact that the two of them had so little in common. They were as different as daylight and dark, so Dave finally gave up, turning his attention to Bret.

Whereas Tad was timid, Bret was outgoing. Tad, abhorring any form of hunting, delighted in spending hours at the pianoforte. By contrast, Bret excelled in hunting and anything else which was of a physical nature. Had Bret's attributes been only physical, however, he would not have held Dave's attention for long, but long ago Dave had recognized the signs of intelligence and determination in the boy. It was these two qualities, so like his own, which bound him close to Bret, as he could never be bound to his adopted son. While Tad was filled with idle

daydreams, Bret was filled with logic, and Dave respected logical thinking. As Bret grew older, Dave struck up a firm friendship with the lad, and eventually he insisted on paying Bret's tuition at the small private school in town, the same school which Tad attended.

Jody was not of an envious nature, yet, she secretly wished that Dave could feel some of that admiration for Tad. It was obvious that he did not, and she was often painfully aware of Tad's wistful expression as he watched Bret and Dave talking or laughing together. She knew Tad realized his shortcomings and was powerless to change them. Her son's character was not weak, but neither was it dynamic.

There was, however, nothing reserved about Kitty, whom Dave adored. Headstrong little Kitty, who had so much zest for life, and who caused Jody so many hours of anxiety. Kitty was the darling of their lives, and the spoiled child fully realized her important position. Only Tad did not seem to fit in at Belle Glen; otherwise, their home was very harmonious.

"I declare, I thought the last guest would never leave," laughed Jody as she joined the Blakes on the veranda.

"Nor have we, my dear," Miss Bert reminded her.

"Oh, you know I don't mean y'all. Good heavens, you're family, not guests," Jody insisted warmly.

"Well, I must say, Kitty's sixth birthday was just as noisy as her fifth one," Emily complained good-naturedly as she rapidly fanned herself.

"Tarnation! It looks like more rain," Dave declared. "If it rains as much this summer, the cotton will be ruined. How are you coming along with your planting, Steve?"

"About like everyone else—having to wait until the weather clears. By the way, Dave, have you heard any rumors about an outbreak of cholera on one of the river packets?"

"Cholera!" Emily and Jody exclaimed together.

Steve leaned over and patted Emily's hand. "There's

nothing for you to worry about, my pet. It's probably just a rumor."

"I'm afraid not, Steve. I understand it's a pretty well-founded fact. One of the river packets from New Orleans docked here the other day, and apparently two of the passengers had cholera," Dave commented grimly.

"Oh no! That's just awful," Jody moaned. "Have any other cases been reported?"

"Not so far, but I imagine there will be shortly. Cholera seldom limits itself to one or two cases," Dave answered.

"Oh dear, and there were so many social functions planned for this summer. Do you suppose they'll all be called off?" Emily asked.

"My dear girl, if there's a cholera epidemic, I hardly think that anyone will have time or thought for social functions," Miss Bert retorted impatiently, rather annoyed with her daughter-in-law's childish attitude.

"Well, it hasn't reached an epidemic stage yet, and maybe it won't. At least it won't spoil today's fun," Jody declared with determination.

"By the way, didn't you have Lemme bring in a ripe watermelon this morning?" asked Dave.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Mammy Lou put it in the deep-well to chill, so it should be nice and cold by now. You'll all stay for some, won't you?" Jody asked her guests.

"Wild horses couldn't drag me away now," laughed Steve.

Shading her eyes, Jody looked over the spacious lawn. "Now where do you suppose the children have gone? They were out there just a moment ago."

"Don't fret, my love. I'll send Doshe to look for them," Dave assured her.

Jody did fret, however, though she politely attempted to hide her anxiety. The news of the cholera outbreak had upset her, but more than that, she was unnerved that her two children were out of sight with Miles and Beth.

Beth was a sweet child, though overly quiet; in many ways, she reminded Jody of Tad. They both loved music, they were both extremely shy, and they were both com-

pletely dominated by Miles and Kitty, who were far more aggressive and unruly.

Had Miles been only mischievous, Jody would not have distrusted him so much, but there was something about the boy which gave Jody an ominous feeling whenever he was present. Try as she might, Jody simply could not like him, much less trust him. In the first place, she had never approved of his habitually referring to the servants as niggers. As she had often pointed out to Tad and Kitty, Negroes might refer to themselves as niggers, usually when angered, but it deeply hurt their feelings if a white person did so. This line of reasoning had puzzled her children, but they respectfully abided by their mother's wishes.

Jody's first real misgivings about Miles, however, had arisen over a seemingly insignificant incident which had occurred about a year ago. Kitty and Tad had taken Miles and Beth to the barn to show them some newborn chickens. After tiring of the fuzzy animals, the children had decided to play a game of hide and seek. Beth, who was chosen to be "it," finally discovered Tad and Kitty's hiding places, and they, in turn, pitched in to help her find Miles. But Miles was nowhere in sight. After searching every conceivable hiding spot, the children eventually became uneasy and ran to the main house for help.

Jody, Dave and all of the house servants joined in the search, thoroughly retracing the children's steps, but to no avail. As they started back towards the house, they heard a great commotion in the barn. Their first fleeting thought was that Miles had hidden in the loft and had met with an accident.

Alarm overcame the group as they raced towards the noise. With dread they rushed into the barn, expecting to find Miles in a pitiful heap on the floor. That, indeed, would have shocked them far less than what they actually did find; for when Miles was discovered, their relief had been displaced by horror.

There Miles stood, towering over the newborn chicks and gleefully watching them flop about in desperation. In one hand he clutched a pocket knife which was covered with blood. In the other, he held the tiny appendages of

the little chicks, which were painfully bereft of any feet. A cruel look of satisfaction twisted his young face as he watched the macabre dance at his feet. In fact, Miles was so absorbed in his hideous act that he was totally unaware that he had been discovered.

Kitty had been the first to recover her senses. With a wild lunge, she began beating at him with her clenched fists until Dave forcefully dragged her away. Kitty had always adored Miles, but at that moment she desperately wanted to hurt him.

Her sudden attack apparently brought Miles back to the present. With an air of complete indifference he flung the feet aside, folded his knife, and calmly stalked out of the barn. The stunned onlookers had watched him go, not quite believing what they had just seen.

The incident was soon forgotten, or at least dropped, but Jody thought of it often. She wondered if anyone really understood Miles's devious mind, even Miles himself. She doubted it. He certainly had been a constant cause for concern at the Blakes' home, and Beth seemed terrified of him at times. Why, then, did Kitty find him so amusing? But how could a six-year-old sense that her friend's mind was warped? After all, Miles was very winsome most of the time, and in all probability, Kitty had completely forgotten the horrible incident.

As Dave returned from instructing Doshe to round up the children, Jody smiled at him and tried to shake off her anxiety. Only her troubled eyes betrayed her inner turmoil.

Meanwhile, the children had left the yard and, at Miles's suggestion, had started towards the river.

"I told you, Miles, I'm not going to take you to the cave. I promised Bret I wouldn't show it to anybody, and I don't break my promises," Tad declared heatedly. He had never liked Miles, and he was not about to betray Bret's confidence. Besides, Beth did not want to go up there either.

"Please, Miles, let's go back. It'll be getting dark soon, and I'm scared to go to the bluff," Beth pleaded worriedly.

"Scairdy cat! Why couldn't Kitty have been my sister instead of you? Just look at her—she's not afraid. Are you, Kitty?"

"Course not! I'm *never* afraid of anything," Kitty boasted, feeling terribly important because of Miles's show of confidence in her. She was the youngest of the bunch, yet Miles had singled her out as being the bravest. Had she been frightened to death, Kitty would not have shown it. And anyway, she was not afraid!

"Come on, Miles. You don't need Tad. I'll show you where the cave is," Kitty volunteered.

"You don't know where it is, Kitty. You've never even been there," Tad accused.

"Yes, I have, smarty! I followed you and Bret the other day, so I do too know where it is!" Kitty retorted defiantly.

Miles looked at the little girl with open admiration. Outside of Miss Bert, Miles had never actually been very fond of anyone. But now a warm surge of affection engulfed him as he looked at the disheveled little girl. If only Kitty lived with him at Roselawn instead of Beth—what fun the two of them could have!

"Well, let's get started," he said. "You coming, Beth?"

"No, I'm going back home with Tad, and I'm gonna tell Miss Jody, too."

"All right, tattletale—go tell her! We don't care, do we, Kitty?"

"No. Let's go," Kitty answered proudly.

Beth and Tad anxiously watched Miles and Kitty run off towards the bluff. "We'd better hurry and tell your mother," Beth suggested.

"No, I can't do that. Kitty would get a whipping for sure."

"Well, she needs one, Tad. Besides, they could get hurt up there," she argued.

Tad looked at Beth in dismay. She simply did not understand that he would never intentionally cause Kitty to get into trouble. Still, there was truth in what Beth said. The bluff was high and treacherous, and if one of them accidentally fell into the churning waters below, it would

mean certain death. For a moment, Tad was at a loss as to what to do; then he remembered Bret.

"Come on. We'll tell Bret and he'll stop them," Tad shouted as he turned and fled towards the overseer's cottage.

When Tad told Bret what had happened, Bret's face clouded with anger. "Go to the house and get help. I'll try to head them off," he said irately.

"I can't, Bret. If I tell Mama, she'll wear the daylights out of Kitty."

"Do what I told you," Bret shouted. "If Kitty tries to climb that bluff, she'll fall, and we may need all the help we can get! If anything happens to her, I'll kill Miles. So help me, I'll kill him!" Bret muttered as he darted off towards the bluff.

"It's awfully high, isn't it, Miles," Kitty said uncertainly as she looked up at the high bluff.

"I thought you said you had been up there before," he answered her shortly.

"Not all the way up. I just saw where they went."

"You wanna turn back?" Miles asked.

"No—but I can't climb in all these skirts."

"Well, take 'em off, but hurry up," he said impatiently.

"I can't! Mama says it's not nice to undress in front of boys. Maybe we'd better go back," Kitty said hesitantly.

"Don't be silly, Kitty. I'm not gonna look at you, and besides, I've seen Beth in her underthings lots of times. Now hurry up!"

"All right, but hide your eyes," Kitty demanded with a growing uneasiness. Quickly she stepped out of her frilly dress and tossed it over a nearby bush. Feeling embarrassed and unsure of herself, Kitty started to tremble. As she stood there in her chemise and pantalettes, she felt positively naked; but Miles was right—she could not possibly climb the bluff in her cumbersome frock.

"All right, I'm ready," she said shyly.

Clumsily they began to ascend the bluff, pausing only briefly to catch their breath. It was a difficult climb and the sharp rocks dug into Kitty's tender hands, causing her

to wince with pain, yet she said nothing. If Miles could climb the bluff, then so could she, she reasoned. But as they got halfway up, Kitty made the mistake of looking down, and it was then that her foot slipped.

Miles looked around just in time to see Kitty topple over the edge. Fortunately, her fall was broken by the remnants of a tree which jutted out from the crag below. Clutching the tree with all her strength, Kitty glanced down at the swift water below.

"Miles, help me. I'm about to fall!" she screamed.

Miles knew the meaning of fear as he looked down and saw Kitty dangling from the quivering tree.

"Miles, come get me. I can't hold on much longer!"

"I can't, Kitty! I can't reach you," he yelled hysterically. "Hold on and I'll run for help."

"No! Don't leave me, Miles. I—I'm afraid. Please don't leave me here by myself," she pleaded.

As Miles stood there uncertainly, Bret bounded into view at the foot of the bluff. When he spotted Kitty hanging from the tree, fear shot through him like a knife. Realizing that there was no time to lose, Bret deftly began climbing the rocky boulders. Within seconds he reached the ledge where Miles stood shaking with fright.

"Hold on, Kitty—I'll get you in just a minute," Bret yelled to her. Tiring fast, Kitty could only look up and nod in understanding.

Grabbing Miles by the shoulders, Bret shook him roughly and exerted all of his self-discipline to keep from hitting him. "Now listen to me. You got her into this fix, and you're gonna help me get her out of it."

"But what can I do?" asked Miles in a bewildered voice.

"Just do what I tell you. If you can hold me by my feet, I think I can reach her. Can you do it?"

"I'll hold you," Miles promised with a confidence he was far from feeling.

"Good—let's get started."

Slowly, Bret lowered himself down the cliff, as Miles held onto him with all of the strength he could muster.

When Bret had extended his body to its full length, he stretched his arms out to Kitty.

"Kitty, hold on real tight with one arm and reach for mine with the other. Can you do that?" he shouted to her.

"I—I'll try," she replied weakly.

"No, don't try—*do it!* You've got to do it. It's your only chance. Ready?"

Kitty nodded, then tightened her grip on the tree. Slowly she let go with her left arm and reached for Bret.

Quickly grabbing Kitty's small hand, Bret yelled for Miles to pull them up. This was the hardest part, and it required all of Miles's strength to pull the weight of the two bodies dangling helplessly below. Fear coupled with determination, gave him the added strength he needed, and soon Bret and Kitty were sitting breathlessly on the ledge beside him.

Bret stood up and carefully pulled Kitty to her feet. "You all right?" he asked worriedly as he looked at her intently.

"I—I think so," she whimpered, blinking back the tears which were clouding her big blue eyes.

Bret gently pulled her to him and stroked her hair. "It's all right now, Kitten—it's all right. Go ahead and cry—you've got a right to, I guess."

Bret's unexpected kindness broke down the last of her composure, and Kitty buried her face against his chest, pent-up sobs racking her small body.

That night, as Kitty lay in bed remembering the near-fatal accident, she thought of Bret with gratefulness. Tad had been right after all, she decided. Bret might be poor, but he was awfully brave. In fact, he was quite unlike anyone else she knew. He had not come to her party, but he had given her the best gift of all—her life! Bret could be nice when he tried, she thought drowsily, then she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter XXIX

Cholera! Epidemic! The dread words were now an actuality. Dave's prediction that the recent outbreak on the river packet would scarcely limit itself to one or two victims had proved to be correct. Not even he, however, had imagined that the epidemic would reach such unbelievable proportions, spreading like wildfire throughout the entire South.

Little was known about cholera, other than that it almost invariably resulted in the death of its victims. It was an extremely horrible death, and the symptoms were always the same: severe diarrhea, vomiting, collapse, cramps and kidney complications. The first cases in Vicksburg were reported along the waterfront, but a few days later the pestilence began spreading throughout the whole town, edging towards the quiet countryside which now anxiously awaited its fate.

Few households were spared by the disease, and in many instances, total families were wiped out. Why did it strike some and not others who lived under the same roof? No one knew the answer, but every conceivable precaution was now being exercised. Public places were avoided and, in town, smudge pots were burned and cannons fired, so that the streets were covered in a fog of

endless smoke. The superstitious believed that the smoke might ward off the bad spirits, while the intelligent hoped to purify the air of death's nauseating stench and combat the flies and mosquitoes which hovered over the town in droves.

Tom Callahan had been stricken at the mill, but Maude Miller had miraculously pulled him through the crisis, somehow managing to escape the disease herself. Others were not so fortunate. The Harrison family was struck severely, with only Andrew surviving. Ben Johnson lost his wife, and Maud's daughter, Lottie, was also one of the fatalities.

Jody's cousin, Luanne, wrote from Natchez that both of her parents had succumbed to the disease, but her son, Mark Alan, had experienced a light case and was making a satisfactory recovery. Inexplicably, Luanne and her husband had escaped the sickness.

The death toll lunged towards new heights, each passing day bringing more sorrow than the one before as the strong watched the weak die in unspeakable agony. Many would gladly have vacated the devastated areas and headed North, but the northern ports were now closed to all incoming riverboats, and so were the railroad lines. Pickets were posted around all towns which had not yet encountered the disease, with explicit orders to "shoot to kill" those who attempted to enter their sanctuary. There was literally no place to go, so people were forced to stay where they were and take the consequences.

Even at Belle Glen the quiet was ominously disrupted by the dull thunder of the cannons which were constantly being fired in town. Then the nightmare turned into reality, as cholera finally reached the plantation and claimed its first helpless victim. The disease quickly spread throughout the slave quarters, and in spite of Jody's tireless efforts, the stricken slaves died by the dozens.

Jamie and Bret were also taken ill, but with Dave and Mammy Lou's help, Jody managed to pull them through the crisis. Would the nightmare never end? That was the question which was foremost in everyone's mind as they bowed their heads and prayed to God for mercy.

"Jody, you've been pushing yourself too hard the past few days. It's not good for you to overtire yourself, particularly now," Dave said as he looked at his wife with concern.

Jody had just returned from checking on her patients in the slave quarters, after first looking in on Jamie and Bret. Now she sank exhaustedly into a nearby chair.

"But Dave, there's so much to be done, and someone has to see that it's done right. Clothes and bedding must be burned, water boiled, and the sick tended to. There's so much to do, and yet so very little that can actually be done for the poor things."

"I know, my love, I know. But if you're not careful, you'll come down with it too."

"I'm being very careful, Dave. I always wash thoroughly and change my clothes before I enter the house."

"That may protect us, but not you," he persisted.

"Did any more collapse in the fields today?" she asked.

"Only one. Maybe the disease has finally run its course."

"Oh, if only it has!" Jody exclaimed fervently, hot tears scalding her tired eyes.

Their conversation was cut short by a loud knock at the side door. Uncle Thad shuffled towards the door and slowly opened it. Hearing excited whispers, Dave left Jody's side and walked into the hall.

"What is it, Uncle Thad?" he asked.

"Dish heah black sez he dun cum frum Ros'lawn. He sez Mist' Steve an' Miss Em'ly dun tuk bad sick, an' dat Miss Bert sen' him heah ter fetch sum he'p."

Dave looked at the frightened Negro with despair. Was there no end to it all? "Wait just a moment while Lemme saddles my horse," he told the trembling boy.

"I'm going too," Jody stated quietly.

Dave turned quickly to find her leaning against the banister, a look of set determination on her pale face.

"Not this time, my dear. You're going to bed and get some rest. Right now," he declared firmly.

Upon hearing his decision, Mammy Lou's head nodded with approval.

"Mammy Lou, help Miss Jody upstairs, then bring her some hot food and see that she eats it."

But before Mammy Lou could carry out these orders, Jody rushed over to Dave and clutched at his arm.

"You must take me with you—you *must!* How could I possibly get any rest knowing that our two dearest friends are stricken with that horrible disease? And those poor children! Don't you see that I can help them in ways that you cannot?" she pleaded stubbornly.

Dave had never been able to refuse her anything, and now that she was begging him with every ounce of strength she had left, he felt his resolve weakening.

"But you have to get some rest, my love. I'm worried about you enough as it is."

"I'll rest—I promise that I will, if only you'll take me with you this one time. I should never forgive myself if something happened to them and I had not even tried to help."

"Mist' Dave, you'se rat de first time! Miss Jody oughta be in dat baid dis min'it, but if'n she's a'gwine ter go, so'm ah," Mammy Lou declared, her bottom lip jutting out defiantly.

"All right, Mammy Lou," Dave sighed tiredly. "Tell Doshe to watch after the children, and Uncle Thad, go tell Lemme to hitch up the carriage."

In spite of Dave and Jody's willingness to help, the trip proved to be futile. Steve and Emily had been stricken days before, and it was only when every other effort had failed that Miss Bert reluctantly sent for Dave and Jody. By the time they reached their friends' bedside, the inevitable signs of death had already begun to spread over Steve and Emily's sunken faces. Shortly after midnight, Emily drifted off into her final sleep, which was followed only a short hour later by Steve's death.

For the first time in her life, Miss Bert was stunned into silence while she watched the children run into their parents' room and hysterically fling themselves across Steve and Emily's lifeless forms. Even Miles's young body

was racked with sobs; he was experiencing a sorrow he had not known he could ever feel.

Then, as Jody tried to quieten the grief-stricken children, an unexpected pain struck at her middle. Deciding that it was only a muscle cramp, she straightened up and brushed the damp tendrils of hair from her hot forehead. The pain struck again, but more severely this time. Jody clutched at the bedpost and steadied herself. The mild headache and nausea which had been plaguing her all day had become suddenly intense, and as the sweat popped out on her forehead, she was overcome by weakness.

Dave saw Jody wince with pain and rushed to her side. "Jody, what is it? Are you ill, dearest?"

"I—I think perhaps I am," she whispered weakly.

Dave swept her into his powerful arms and quickly carried her to the carriage. He silently cursed himself all the way home for not having stood behind his convictions and insisting that she not accompany him to the Blakes'. He tried to believe that she was only overcome by exhaustion and not the fatal sickness which had only tonight robbed them of their closest friends. But deep down, he knew better, and by morning his worst fears were confirmed. *Cholera!*

Once again the disease ran its course true to form. The severe diarrhea eventually subsided, only to be followed by an onslaught of vomiting. For two days and nights Jody's frail body was racked by the violent purgings which constantly persisted until, finally, the last of her strength began to ebb before Dave's very eyes. Again and again the pains struck, and she repeatedly doubled up in agony.

Doc Blanks came by twice a day, but there was little he could do other than voice encouragement.

Although Jody pathetically cried out for water, she was unable to digest even the smallest amount. As her thirst intensified on the fourth day, her pulse became more rapid and weak. Chills alternated with sweating, and blankets were intermittently applied and removed.

Finally, the telltale signs of death appeared, as Jody's face became sunken and her eyes glazed. By nightfall her

tawny skin had taken on a bluish tinge, and it was then that Dave fully realized it was only a matter of time before he would lose her.

Still he refused to give up hope, and as he kept vigil by her side that night, he anxiously watched for some miraculous change to occur. But no change became apparent until just before dawn, and then it was one which only increased his uneasiness.

Jody had been shifting from unconsciousness to delirium throughout the long night. Although he and Mammy Lou had tried every possible way to ease her discomfort, their efforts had been in vain. Then, as night reluctantly gave way to a new day, Jody's eyes suddenly flew open and for a moment traveled about the room until they finally came to rest on Dave. A weak smile appeared on her lips as he gently grasped her hot hand and held it in his own.

Relief spread over his haggard face as he looked down at her, for it was the first time she had been fully conscious in two days. His relief was short-lived however, for moments later Jody began nervously plucking the covers with her free hand and her glazed look told him that she no longer saw him at all. Instead, her gaze was fixed above him, on the ceiling, her eyes slowly traveling back and forth across space as though she were watching something that only she could see. Once she looked back at him, an excited, almost happy look on her face as she tried to tell him what she saw; yet the only sounds she made were totally incoherent. For a moment she looked frustrated, as if she realized she was not making herself understood. Then a tear slowly trickled down the side of her face as her eyes looked upwards once more, returning to a vigil which Dave, now frightened, refused to contemplate.

It was not until the sun peeked over the treetops that her eyes finally closed and her shallow breathing stopped. For a moment Dave could not believe that she was really gone and he quickly lowered his head to her chest and listened for her heartbeat. When none became evident, he frantically caught hold of her limp wrist, hoping against

hope that he would find a pulse, but there was none. With a sob he gathered her to him, holding her tightly as though defying death to take her from him.

"Oh, Jody—Jody, don't leave me! Please don't leave me now," he murmured brokenly, his tears falling on her face as he began gently rocking her back and forth in his arms.

He didn't know how long he remained thus; five, perhaps ten minutes, holding her to him, determined to keep her near for as long as possible. Suddenly his breath caught in his throat as, unbelievably, he felt a slight, almost undiscernible, stirring in his arms. He watched dumbfoundedly as Jody's eyes slowly fluttered open and she looked up at him, a puzzled smile appearing on her face.

"It's—it's dawn, isn't it," she asked weakly.

For a moment Dave could not answer, nor could he fully believe that she had actually spoken. She had died; of that he had been quite certain. And yet she was alive now! His confused mind tried to grasp at some explanation, but there was none, none that he could understand. Feeling the pulse in her slim wrist, he realized that it was quite strong and regular, and her coloring was good, better than it had been for days. She *was* alive and, what's more, she was going to get well! It was unbelievable but true, and a silent prayer of thankfulness hovered on his lips as his moist eyes rested on her face.

"It *is* dawn, isn't it, Dave?" she questioned again, clearly perplexed that he had not answered her.

"Yes, my love, it's dawn," he assured her somewhat unsteadily.

"Just like it was in my dream," she whispered musingly.

"Dream—what dream, sweetheart?"

"I dreamed that I was sick and in so much pain, so very much pain—no one could help me. And then I—I saw Pa, right here in this very room. I knew he wasn't alive, but he was here and—and he wanted me to go with him somewhere—" Her voice trembled, hesitating as though she were reluctant to go on.

Dave looked down at her, willing her to continue, for he had to know the truth, had to be certain that what he suspected had, in fact, actually happened.

"Was that all of the dream, Jody?" he questioned softly.

"No—no, there was more. There was this ringing sound in my ears, and then I was being pulled quickly through a long, dark tunnel, I guess, and when I reached the end of it, I wasn't in pain anymore. Everything was so peaceful and quiet, and I suddenly felt so—so completely happy." She paused, an ecstatic look sweeping over her face at the memory. "And then there was this—this bright light, only it wasn't just a light. It was a spirit—yes, some kind of a divine being, beckoning me to the light, pulling me closer and closer. I knew if I went any further, I would never be able to return, and it was then that I heard you crying out to me. I—I wanted to go with the light, but I wanted to be with you, too. I—I knew that you needed me, that I couldn't leave you. Not yet—it wasn't the right time."

"Thank God," Dave muttered brokenly, "thank God that it wasn't."

"Dave—it *was* only a dream, wasn't it?" she asked uncertainly.

Dave hesitated, searching for the right words. He knew she would have to know the truth sooner or later, but not now. For now, it was enough that she was here, here where she belonged.

"Yes, dearest, it was only a dream," he murmured, kissing her forehead. "You're here with me, and somehow—I don't think we'll ever be parted again. Not in this life, nor in the next. So you must hurry and get well, my love, because—*we have so much living to do.*"